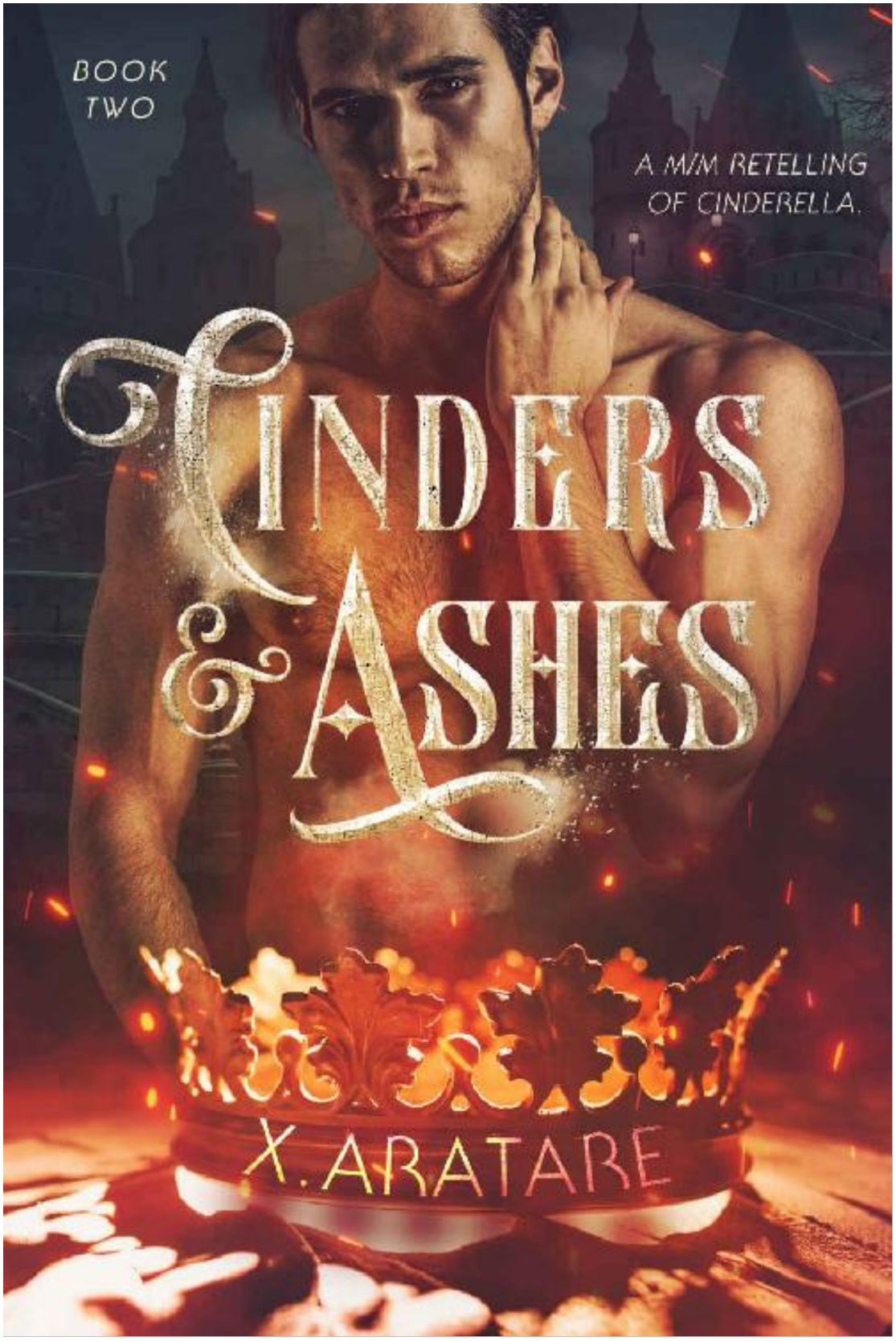
BOOK
TWO
A M/M RETELLING
OF CINDERELLA.
CINDERS
& ASHES
X. ARATARE

CINDERS & ASHES

A GAY RETELLING OF CINDERELLA (BOOK 2)

X. ARATARE

CONTENTS

WHAT'S HAPPENED SO FAR?

1. LOVE IS BLINDNESS
2. NO CHOICE
3. DARK DREAM
4. THE WEBS WE WEAVE
5. FAMILY
6. HONOR
7. CONNECTION
8. FATE
9. TAKE
10. ON YOUR FEET
11. THE FLAPPING OF WINGS
12. WHAT PRICE FREEDOM
13. LIFE OR DEATH?
14. THE HEIR OF HOUSE AETURNAL
15. CATCHING UP
16. REUNITED
17. THE IMPORTANCE OF DEATH MAGIC
18. BELIEF
19. ON THE ROAD AGAIN
20. HAND OF FATE?
21. WOLF AND RAVEN
22. CAPTURE
23. LONG LOST
24. REVELATIONS

WHAT'S HAPPENED SO FAR?

In Cinders & Ashes Book 1, Finn Ashton is a servant of his own estate, serving the needs of his obnoxious stepfamily. His stepfather, Lord Gerard Steward, is desperate to gain social approval and marry his two sons, Christopher and Miles, off to nobility. But due to his being the son of a merchant, he is seen as a social climber and would be ignored except for the fact that Tanglewood Manor has the most fertile land in the Kingdom of Rirea. That fertility is due to Finn's magical abilities.

Finn is a half-blood Fae. His mother was (mostly) human, but his unknown father was Fae. Finn has no idea who his father is and claims not to care, but this unknown Fae did give Finn the ability to drain life, mix it with his magic and cause the estate to bloom. He has done this every year since his mother's death when he was but 5 years old, the same death that revealed his magic and his Fae heritage. Since the deaths of the prior king and queen of Rirea, allegedly at the Fae King Thalanil Ravenspar's hands, all Fae found in Rirea are put to death due to suspicions that they have loyalty to King Thalanil. Finn's stepfamily has agreed to keep his Fae blood secret in exchange for him serving them, making the estate bloom and never seeking the title of Lord of Tanglewood.

However, this year, there is so little life in Rirea that Finn is unable to honor his promise to make the estate fertile. Desperate for his stepfamily to keep his secret, Finn steals life from the Fae side of the Wall. The Wall is a magical structure that divides the human Kingdom of Rirea from the Fae Empire of the Eclipse Throne. It was erected right after the deaths of the human monarchs. Finn hopes this small amount of stolen life won't be noticed, but his hope is a vain one.

As a "reward" for making Tanglewood bloom, Finn's stepfamily gives him a half day off to spend mostly as he wishes. He goes into the Lupine Woods only to find a beautiful man being dragged by his horse and evidence that the Fae are aware of the stolen life.

Little does Finn know that the man he rescues is, in fact, King Rohan De Clare, King of Rirea. Rohan has as many troubles as Finn. He knows that his kingdom is dying and suspects that the Wall is draining all the fertility from the soil and changing the normal animals into monsters. His uncle urges him to consider marrying one of the nearby kings or queens to obtain Rirea some relief, but Rohan does not wish to surrender Rirea's independence, nor his *own*.

His uncle then suggests he, instead, have a meeting with all of the surrounding kingdoms, including the war-like and dangerous Achuviel Kingdom and its King Tearlach. That suits Rohan better as, after a magical afternoon with Finn, he cannot imagine wanting anyone but the bewitching young man with the green eyes.

Confessing his love affair to the Captain of the Guard Leonid Blanchet and his noble companion Lord Serxio Lemos, the three of them head out into the Lupine Woods to the cabin where Finn and Rohan have agreed to meet again. The goal is to

spruce up the hovel for a romantic picnic, but things do not go at all as planned.

For his part, Finn has found a new lease on life after his afternoon with the amazing Rohan, who he believes to be a simple noble lord and *not* the King of Rirea due to a misunderstanding and lie that Rohan builds upon. Finn's time is not his own as a servant, but he is determined to see Rohan again. His eldest step brother Christopher though appears to intuit that something is going on with Finn. The two of them make a deal that Finn will help Christopher with his potions meant to restore Rirea's soil in exchange for keeping silent about whatever Finn's getting up to.

But, to Finn's dismay, the next day Christopher and Miles insist on coming into the woods with him to look for herbs for Christopher's experiments. Finn had hoped to grab the herbs and go to the cabin to meet Rohan, but now he is stuck with his step brothers.

As if things could not get more complicated for Rohan and Finn, the two parties meet each other in the woods. They must pretend not to know one another. Christopher, though, seems to recognize Rohan from somewhere. Before any secrets are betrayed, a section of the Wall disappears, and they all see the King of Wolves Tyreon looking at them. When Tyreon begins to move--a move that will lead to an attack in Rohan's eyes--Rohan draws his crossbow and fires, but Finn jumps between the bolt and the wolf, for Finn has dreamed of the great white wolf and knows he means them no harm.

Finn is struck by the bolt. It goes cleanly through his side. Tyreon drags Finn's unconscious body to the Fae side of the Wall. While Christopher and Miles run away, Rohan, Serxio and Leonid ride after Finn and Tyreon. While they manage to scare off the King of Wolves, when they go to bring back a wounded Finn to the Rirean side of the Wall, they find that the Wall is once again intact, and there is no way home.

And that's where we left off!

LOVE IS BLINDNESS

Fae King Thalanil Ravenspar stood atop the highest tower of Aymar, his summer palace. The fierce wind caused his long, black hair to stream back from his head like a silk banner. It stirred the white, fur cloak he clasped loosely around his lithe form. He drew the cloak tighter to keep out more of the stinging wind.

Spring was here, but winter's last dying gasp still tinged the air with a bitter chill. Not to mention that the ruby red, silk mage's robes he wore beneath the cloak were made for warmer weather or, at least, for sitting near a roaring fire. But it was always cold on Aymar's highest tower even in high summer, let alone early spring. The wind seemed to want to freeze him into an ice statue, but he did not retreat down the steps into his beloved summer palace and join the revelry of his people as they celebrated winter's end.

He stayed where he was.

Twilight was falling all around him. The Wall reflected the dying sunlight, obscuring the human Kingdom of Rirea from his crimson-eyed gaze for a moment. He watched as the sun sank and the milky jade color of the Wall turned dark green and then black. The lights of Rirea's villages and the City of Dawnmore appeared as the sun dipped fully behind the horizon. These lights could now be seen twinkling in the Wall's darkness like the reflection of stars in a black pool.

A sense of melancholy stole over him. This was a feeling he had not allowed himself to experience in some time. He had avoided looking at the Wall and Rirea beyond it to avoid such feelings. There had been a time when he had eagerly flown his wyvern, Shadeheart, into Rirea. There had been a time when Rirea had seemed the most precious place in the world to him. For *she* lived there.

Lady Maeve Ashton.

His heart had quickened at the thought of being with her, even if it had meant roaming another land, a land that should have been--*by rights*--a part of his own empire, but had been ceded away in a vain attempt to buy peace between humans and the Fae. Yet he had not cared about that back then. Maeve had been all that had mattered, and he would have gladly given up claim to Rirea forever if that meant she would but smile.

His hands tightened on the edges of his cloak. How foolish he had been! Love truly was blindness. He had abased himself for a mortal! And then *she* had rejected *him* in the end! She had never even explained to him why she had wanted nothing to do with him. She had just told him to go away and to never come back.

He had thought her heartless at the time, despite the fact that her voice had been brittle as spring ice and tears had welled in her eyes as large as summer rivers when she had said those words, as if she had not *wanted* to say them but *had* to. Now he wondered if he had been wrong not to insist on an explanation for her change of

heart. Now he wondered if his pride had not led him to lose the one person who mattered most.

But it was too late now. Maeve was dead, and unless the Wheel returned her to life again in another body, in another life, he would never see her again unless his own immortal one was cut short of eternity by a blade, poison or a spell. But even if she were to be brought back would they recognize each other? Or would they be strangers?

People whispered that her rejection of him stemmed from the fact that they could not marry. The Fae would never have accepted a human queen, not even one as brilliant and beautiful as her, with her ancient mixed blood and wisdom far beyond her mortal years.

He'd promised her that as long as she lived, he would love only her. He would wed no other. She would be his one and only. In all but name, she would be his queen. But perhaps that had not been enough for her. He could think of no other reason for her to abandon him when he had needed her most.

Or, maybe he hadn't wanted to see another reason.

He could still remember the last conversation they'd had before her rejection. It hadn't been about marriage, but rather about his brother, Marikoth, and about death.

"I do not know if I want you to see me wither and grow old, Thalanil," Maeve had said as her right hand had self-consciously traced the still smooth skin of her left cheek. "Though we Ashtons live long for humans, we are not immortal like pure-blood Fae. We age slowly, but we do age. I will be an old woman at some point while you will be the same as you are now. Will you still love me when I am old and gray?"

He had cupped her chin with one hand, allowing his fingers to trail along the delicate skin of her jaw. "I will love you even when your hair is sparse and snow white, and your skin is thin and age-spotted."

She gave him a wry smile. "You make me sound so attractive in this future! Shall I have a hump? Walk with a cane? Be missing teeth as well?"

He tossed back his head and laughed. "You will forever be beautiful to me, Maeve, even if all of that were to come true and more."

"But the Fae despise--or, perhaps, *fear*--aging and death. You must acknowledge this," she argued gently even as she took his hand in hers. "Because those things are the antithesis of what you are."

He pursed his lips. "I suppose death is immortality's greatest nemesis in some way." Then words he had not meant to speak slipped out, "That was why my older brother had to be killed."

There was a shocked silence and then Maeve exclaimed, "*Brother*?! You've never told me that you had an older brother!" Maeve's bewitching green eyes went wide. "And you say he was *killed*? How? By whom? Why?"

Thalanil was as surprised as she was by his revelation, but for a very different reason. He shifted uncomfortably, but he hid it by pretending he was adjusting his position against the gigantic Iadlark tree. Its golden leaves and silver bark graced one of Aymar's peaceful courtyards. Maeve was seated on a blanket opposite him beneath its spreading, gracious branches. They were picnicking, protected from the summer sun's intensity by the golden leaves. Maeve was frozen in the act of popping one of the globe-like, black grapes into her mouth at the mention of his brother.

"If you do not wish to discuss him, Thalanil, we do not have to," Maeve easily told him. "I was just *surprised*. Forgive me for prying."

"There is nothing to forgive, and it is hardly prying. How could you be anything but surprised? I have never mentioned him before, and… I did not intend to now, but I have been thinking of him lately," Thalanil confessed.

"What has brought him to mind?"

Thalanil pursed his lips again. This was yet another topic he had not wanted to mention, but he trusted Maeve with everything. "The… *overgrowth*."

"Oh, yes," she said quietly.

"You've noticed it?" He lifted an eyebrow up.

"You've had a dozen Battle Mages accompany me from Rirea to here if you do not fly me on Shadeheart yourself," she reminded him gently. "I have seen the way the vines reach for unwary limbs and the uptick in the predators in the forest. I've noticed the burnings as well all around the city to keep the forest back from the wall."

"Of course, you have. You would not miss such things." He grimaced. "I was thinking of my brother because his magic might have been useful against all this *life*. Too much life. Could that be a thing?"

"Everything is certainly… thriving," she said carefully.

"Things are out of balance and I do not know why," Thalanil confessed.

"What kind of magic did your brother have?"

He glanced up at her. Her intelligence and curiosity sparkled in her eyes. There was nothing that Maeve was not curious about and no subject she would not dive into unless it harmed someone by doing so. He knew that he could have fobbed her off on this intensely important part of his life, his family, and she would never have brought it up again since it had hurt him. Knowledge was important to Maeve, but people mattered more. And perhaps that, and his utter love and trust in her, caused him to break the seal on a subject that was verboten, not only in his own family circle to mention, but for *anyone* to do so.

Thalanil still hesitated a moment more before answering her, "Death Magic."

"What is Death Magic?" Again, she was careful with how she asked by keeping her tone neutral.

"It is where a Mage draws his or her power from living things. The earth. Plants. Animals. *People*," he explained. "The life force of anything that lives can be transformed into power that can be used however the Death Mage wants."

"Is that a--a *rare* form of magic?"

"Thankfully, yes. Very rare."

Silence fell between them again for long moments. He could tell that Maeve did not want to upset him with her questions, but as always, she was intrigued.

Finally, she asked, "What was your brother's name?"

He hesitated again but said, "Marikoth." The name rolled off his tongue and yet felt alien in the extreme. "I have not said his name in centuries, perhaps longer, I am not sure. In the beginning, I had to hold myself back from saying it, from yelling it to the stars."

"You loved him," she intuited.

"I worshipped him." To admit that was almost freeing. Something in him unlocked as he spoke of his brother.

"What was he like?" She lowered her hand with the grape to her lap, seemingly forgotten.

"He was… *special*. Brilliant and beautiful. Talented and resourceful. He seemed to me to be the epitome of what it was to be a Fae," Thalanil spoke each word carefully, much like she had, as if they were made of cut glass. "I idolized him as some younger brothers do their elders but perhaps I did not see him clearly. I must

not have. Or it was just a cruel joke of fate to make him so wonderful only to… well, only to have it end as it did."

He lowered his head, hiding behind his hair in a way he hadn't since he was a child ages ago. He'd last done it when he had asked his father what had *really* happened on that special hunting trip his father and his brother had taken from which Marikoth had never returned.

With a sigh, he explained further, "You know a Fae's magic comes from nature, yes?"

She nodded and spread her arms wide. "Hence the beauty of your lands. The sheer abundance of life here."

"And the Ravenspars--my family especially--have a deep connection to all living things," he continued, "but, from time to time, there is a child born of our House that is attuned to *death* instead of life. Some say we were cursed when we took over control of the Empire from House Aeturnal, but I believe it was always in our blood."

The grape had again been poised to pass between her lips, but she set it down again, uneaten. "Death Magic."

"Their magic allows them to drain life and perform terrible, powerful spells with that stolen energy. To raise the dead. To enslave the living. To turn a lush world into a dead desert," he told her. His throat tightened with every word.

"That sounds… my gods, what a difficult gift to have," she murmured. "How sad and terrible a burden!"

Her great and noble heart would feel badly for the bearer of this magic. She would find it sad and not terrifying. He found, in that moment, that he hated the Fae for not wanting this extraordinary person as one of their rulers. She would have made a just, wise and remarkable queen. Or perhaps he hated *himself* for not simply marrying her and damning the consequences.

"But it is more than that. Such a child…" He grimaced. "Such a child will come into their powers when they drain their *mother's* life force first."

Maeve's eyes widened. "On purpose?"

"No, not necessarily, they may not even realize what they are doing. But it is a part of the Death Mage's *natural* journey, you see," he explained. "Unless the child is killed before this happens, they will kill their mother no matter what. It is either the child's life or the mother's. There is no other option."

"Your mother…" Maeve's lower lip trembled until she firmed it. "She *died*…"

"Yes." Thalanil rubbed his temples as if he felt a headache coming on. "My parents loved Marikoth. Who could not? They refused to follow what they considered to be superstition. So what if my mother developed the marks of a twisting, thorn-studded vine along her spine when pregnant?"

"Wait! What--what did you say she had?" Maeve stared hard at him.

"It looked like a tattoo, but it appeared naturally. As the pregnancy progressed, what looked like a vine studded with thorns wound up her spine," he said.

She said nothing. Her expression was strangely blank before she was blinking and asking, "And this was a sure sign that the child would be a--a Death Mage?"

"Yes, no doubt," he said distractedly. "But it was also said that the mother's health would start to fail as soon as such a Death Mage was born. She was more fragile after Marikoth's birth. But she had *me*. A second child! So rare among the Fae. Therefore all this talk about Death Magic was just--just *nonsense*! And it was ignored."

"But it wasn't nonsense," Maeve stated, rather than asked. Her right hand curved over her stomach then as if she were feeling unwell or were protecting

herself.

"No, it wasn't." Thalanil clenched his teeth for a moment. "My elder brother adored my parents. He had *no idea* what he'd done, even when his magic just exploded out of him right after her death. So when our father took him out for a special hunting trip--"

"By the gods, no," Maeve whispered, green eyes huge in her head.

"He had to, Maeve. For he realized that if the tales were true about the child killing the mother then the other things about such a child were true too," Thalanil told her grimly.

"What things?" Both of her hands were cupping her smooth stomach now. The grape she'd been holding rolled away into the grass.

"That such a child will destroy the Empire if allowed to live," he whispered. "That such a child will destroy *all* life eventually unless balance is somehow restored."

Maeve was silent then burst out, "I don't believe that."

Confusion filled him and he furrowed his brow. "But you just heard--"

"What I heard is that a *child*--who was not trained to use their *natural* magic--accidentally harmed someone they loved. If *that* is even true!" she cried. "It could be a coincidence what happened with her death and your brother's magical awakening."

Thalanil's head snapped up, startled by the passion in her voice, and the sheer rage in her eyes. He had expected tears from Maeve, but also understanding for the heavy choice that his father had had to make.

"My mother wasted away, Maeve."

"A coincidence!" She shook her head vigorously and her long, dark hair fell from its elaborate bun.

"And my brother showed powers that he never had before? Coincidence too that the grass and plants blackened all around him and turned to ash? Or that animals withered under his hand?"

"How many times have you, yourself, said that your magic is tied as much to nature as to your emotions, Thalanil?" she challenged. "Your mother died and your brother had an understandable emotional reaction that caused him to lose control of his powers! And afterwards, he was experiencing great grief!"

"My father was certain that Marikoth was cursed with Death Magic. It was not a conclusion he came to lightly," Thalanil's voice was rough with emotion.

"And? What if Marikoth did have Death Magic?"

"He--"

"Was he a good person, Thalanil?" Maeve asked. Her green eyes searched his face almost desperately.

"Yes, but…"

"So why could he not have been *trained* to control the magic?" She grasped his hands in hers. "He didn't *want* to hurt your mother. He might not have wanted to hurt anyone."

"There is no one with that gift alive for a reason," he reminded her. "Because anyone with that magic would destroy the Empire."

"How could that be true?"

"The magic corrupts."

"So does any power! Why wouldn't your father trust Marikoth's good heart? Unless…" Her lower lip trembled again. "Unless, in his grief, in his desire to blame someone, his anger was greater than his love for your brother."

"He was certain--"

“That your brother was going to be a life-destroying, empire-crushing Death Mage?” Maeve shook her head as she protectively brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. “Did you see that in Marikoth? Any corruption?”

“My father was certain,” Thalanil repeated stiffly for the third time.

What did it matter what he had thought? Thalanil had been a child at the time! His rosy memories of Marikoth could have been wrong. He trusted his father in this. Maeve’s judgment must be incorrect!

“And what of your mother? Was she certain?” Maeve pushed and Thalanil grew stiffer. “Would she have wanted Marikoth to die? For I know I would *never* want my child killed. Not to save myself and certainly not in punishment after I passed away.”

“And I would *kill* any child that would endanger your life!” Thalanil grasped her hands tightly in his.

They stared at one another as if they did not know the other person at all. Then they looked away, both of them silent and unhappy and hurt. Silence fell for a long, long time.

“I’m feeling unwell, Thalanil,” Maeve stated softly. “Can you… can you… take me home, please?”

“If you’re unwell then you should stay in Aymar and return to Tanglewood when you’re feeling better,” he said, shaking off the argument between them. The last thing he wanted was for Maeve to leave!

“No,” her eyes would not meet his, “no, I really must go home.”

It was soon after that argument that she’d told him to go away.

Looking back at it now, it was more likely this disagreement between them that had caused her love for him to dim. Not marriage, but *children*. Not being a queen, but being a mother. Why had he not connected this before? She’d wanted children. Always. His children. And he had said he would kill them. For *her*, to be sure, but a woman such as Maeve would have found such an answer *abhorrent*.

So how ironic that he’d found out his father had *not* killed his elder brother. His father had simply exiled Marikoth. And then to save his people from that mistake, Thalanil had to raise the Wall. He had continued to try and reach Maeve after that, to bring her back to him, to, at least, have her stay safe with his people.

“No, Thalanil, I will not come to you,” she had written. “You can hide behind your Wall, but I think you should defend everyone, not just the Fae, against Marikoth. Or maybe you should reach out to your brother and right the terrible wrong your father did. See if you can’t break the ice around his heart.”

He stared at the Wall now, knowing that she no longer lived beyond it. She’d died soon after marrying. She’d married someone else.

Someone else...

He shook himself. The Wall had protected his people from his father’s mistake, but that protection might be ending. The theft of life from the Empire of the Eclipse Throne could only have been accomplished by a powerful Fae magic user. A Death Magic user.

Marikoth must have found a way through the Wall, but...

But the magic had felt different than that used against him, Cyrille and Alexandre on Twilgate Cliffs. Thalanil couldn’t have said how exactly. Was it cleaner somehow? Was it less corrupt? Plus, only a small amount of life had been taken. If his elder brother had found a way to take life from his side of the Wall, he would not have risked Thalanil noticing for such a sip. But the irony was that the overgrowth in the part of the forest that had been affected had been cured for the

moment. Yet that might not have been the Death Mage's intention. It was likely just a mistake.

So Thalanil remained on the top of his tower, wondering if Marikoth was finally at his gates, or if he had a new enemy who he knew nothing about.

NO CHOICE

King Rohan De Clare cradled Finn's head in his lap. Rohan did not know the beautiful young man's last name or where he lived, but he was certain down to his bones that if Finn did not recover, he would never forgive himself. Finn was a light that should not be snuffed out. Yet Finn was still unconscious. He had been since he was injured and hope for recovery was dimming.

He wasn't just injured. I shot him with a silver bolt meant for that monster wolf, Tyreon! I'm the cause of this, Rohan reminded himself.

Not that he truly needed reminding. His hands were still stained with Finn's blood. He'd managed to pull out the bolt and bind the wound. He saw that his fingernails were filthy with dark crusts as he drew a shaking hand across Finn's fair brow. Finn's blood was ground into his skin and sunk beneath his nails. If Finn died, he would never truly be able to wash himself clean.

Why did you try to protect that beast, Finn? Rohan wondered. *Why sacrifice your life for a wolf's? Not sacrifice!* He quickly amended. *You will be fine, I swear it, Finn. You will be more than that. If only we can get back to Rirea. Back beyond the Wall to a healer.*

But night had already fallen on the Fae Empire of the Eclipse Throne. They were no nearer finding a way back to Rohan's kingdom than they had been several hours ago when they had become trapped here, and Finn's condition was getting worse.

After the fight with Tyreon and the closure of the Wall, they had discovered this hiding place, a massive tree that was hollow inside. Rapacious vines and blooms as large as his head covered the grave of this behemoth of the forest. They'd been able to slip between those vines and make a passable camp inside of it. They'd even chanced a small fire as Finn had begun to shiver uncontrollably. It was a risk as the smoke could have alerted the Fae to their presence, but Finn's life was worth it.

Worth so much more than the danger of discovery.

He studied Finn's face. The olive-toned skin that had looked sun-kissed when he'd first seen the young man just the other day--*has it only been one day since I met him?*--was now pale as milk. There was an unhealthy sheen of sweat covering Finn's brow and upper lip. Finn's green eyes were closed, and they moved restlessly under his now-shadowed lids. Finn was dreaming, but whatever his mind was showing him was not pleasant.

Rohan drew down the picnic blanket that he had draped over that lithe form and pulled up Finn's tattered tunic to check the wound on his side. He'd used the linen napkins that Serxio had packed for his romantic picnic with Finn as bandages. There was a large, dark red stain already blooming atop them, but it had not increased in size for some time. So, hopefully, the bleeding had stopped, but he had

no way of knowing if any of Finn's internal organs had been damaged. They needed a healer for that.

"Any sign of Leonid, Serxio?" Rohan asked about his Captain of the Guard Leonid Blanchet.

He was questioning his companion, Lord Serxio Lemos, who stood by the opening into the tree, gazing out between the vines. He was nervously eating an apple. He'd been nervously eating since they'd camped. If he kept it up, the food would be all gone within a few more hours.

"None," Serxio said with a wave of his silk-clad arm. "What if Leonid doesn't find that wolf? I mean, assuming we're right that the wolf was the one that opened the Wall and can--or *will*--do so again for us."

"I do not believe that Tyreon has gone far," Rohan said slowly.

He thought of his Uncle Hugues then and his love triangle with Lady Maeve Ashton and Fae King Thalanil Ravenspar. The wolf had a bone to pick with his family. It would not stray far. It would want to finish what it had begun.

Serxio glanced between him and the vine-covered entrance. Alarm flared in his handsome face. "You mean it could still be *here*?"

"Do not worry, Serxio. I will protect us if it comes this way." Rohan patted his sword, Lightbringer, that was on the ground beside him. He thought he felt a *spark* of lightning from it and snapped his hand away.

"Why would such a beast stay nearby? To finish dragging Finn into its den for a snack?" Serxio turned his black, curly head fully towards Rohan in alarm.

"No, the wolf serves King Thalanil. I imagine it was reacting to me being near the Wall," Rohan stated.

"But…" Serxio broke off and frowned.

"What is it, Serxio?"

"The wolf focused on Finn." His companion's hands twisted nervously together.

"You must be mistaken. He is a servant. A farm boy. Not anyone who would draw King Thalanil's ire," Rohan disagreed. "Except for, of course, his connection to me."

"Yes, yes, you're right. That must be why Tyreon tried to take Finn from you." Serxio nodded vigorously as if that would dispel his concerns.

Yet Rohan's own explanation did not entirely satisfy him, despite what he had just said to Serxio. For one thing, he had not mentioned to Serxio that he could have sworn that Finn had whispered Tyreon's name just before throwing himself between the wolf and Rohan's bolt.

But, again, how would Finn know the King of Wolves? Rohan challenged his own assumption. *And what would the Tyreon want with a servant? No, it must be me that is triggering this unwanted attention. And whatever my uncle is doing to find the tree with glass leaves.*

"If Leonid does not track down this wolf--which he will, of course, he's woodsy and all that--but if he doesn't do so *soon*…" Serxio bit his lower lip as Finn groaned and thrashed.

"It is all right, Finn. It is all right. I'm here. You're safe." Rohan stroked Finn's forehead and cheeks. When Finn quieted he turned back to Serxio, and said, "We will think of something. Whatever it takes, we will do." Rohan tucked the blanket closer around Finn's shivering body. "Put some more wood on the fire, please, Serxio."

Serxio moved with alacrity to add more branches to the fire, though he did glance out between the vines again as he was doing so. Rohan guessed he was worried what Leonid might say about them increasing the fire's strength and, hence,

its smoke. Tyreon was the only one who knew they were on the Fae side of the Wall and it did not need smoke to locate them. Its nose would do.

And Tyreon could be leading the Fae king here right now, Rohan worried.

The summer palace of Aymar was more than a week's journey from here. At least his memory of the old maps told him that.

But what if Tyreon can communicate with other Fae? He does not have to go all the way to Aymar, Rohan realized with growing unease. *What if he simply brings local guards here? Serxio is no fighter. It would be me against who knows how many Battle Mages. Yet if we were captured, at least Finn might receive some medical attention…*

Serxio expertly laid branches on the fire. He glanced up at Rohan then and gave a weak smile.

"Not exactly the romantic picnic you hoped for. At least it's prettier here than in the Lupine Woods," Serxio joked.

"That is the one upside," Rohan agreed sadly.

"If only Finn were awake to see it." Serxio stared at Finn's beautiful face. "I see why you were so taken with him."

"His outer beauty is considerable, but his soul shines even more," Rohan said as he passed his hand over Finn's feverish brow once more. It did seem when he touched Finn that the young man's distress eased slightly.

"Do bolts always have this effect on people? It is a bad wound to be sure, but…" Serxio looked at him helplessly.

"He likely has Fae blood," Rohan guessed. "The bolts are inscribed with spells that affect Fae more than humans."

"Fae blood?! He's a… He's…" Serxio's brown eyes widened. "But I thought…"

Rohan grimaced at his reaction even though he should have expected it. "Up north, where you are from, I'm sure it's rare to see anyone with Fae ancestry, but here, in the south, it's quite common."

"Forgive me, my king! I should not have--"

"No, no, I understand the prejudice." Rohan waved the apology away. "My uncle rooted out those with Fae sympathies after my parents' deaths." He frowned. He had put a stop to that after he had taken over as king, but still the fear of showing Fae blood remained. He had not truly realized how much. "People interpreted it as anyone with Fae blood was suspect, but really that would implicate most every house in the land. My family tree has quite a bit of Fae lineage, in fact."

Serxio winced. "I had no idea!"

"People forget what is convenient to forget," Rohan said with a sigh. "I was taught several Fae dialects from the time I was an infant. Uncle Hugues kept up my instruction, though I do wonder what an actual Fae would think of my pronunciation."

"I suppose it is one thing to read in the history books that we were long friends with the Fae and another thing to really know it," Serxio said with a wry smile.

"Indeed."

Rohan gazed down upon Finn's beautiful face. Was Finn the result of some dalliance of a Fae with the young man's mother? Perhaps. The delicacy of his features, even the way he moved, reminded Rohan of the stories of Fae. How had he not seen it before? But it was bad luck that it was true. For the bolt's effect on a pure human would have not been half this terrible. Rohan pressed his lips together.

"I am sorry I got you into this, Serxio."

Serxio widened brown eyes at him. “My king, I would be nowhere else but by your side, especially in times of danger. I am not exactly the best warrior, but I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

Rohan’s smile changed to one of genuine pleasure as he took in the rather foppish, young lord. He did not doubt Serxio’s good heart, but he had no sword arm. Even the sword he carried was more for show than actual use. There was not a dint on its shiny blade.

“Thank you, Serxio. But I will endeavor that you make no such sacrifice--” Rohan’s words were cut off as he heard a rustling at the vine entrance. His crossbow was up and aimed at the figure who slipped inside. He lowered it the moment he saw who it was. “Leonid!”

But his pleasure at recognizing his Guard captain fell away when he saw the grim expression on Leonid’s face.

“You did not find Tyreon?” Rohan stated more than asked.

Leonid shook his head. His hair was full of leaves. There were scratches on his right cheek and thick sap smears on his left. He looked like he had gotten into a fight with the vegetation. Hopefully, it was that and not the Fae.

“No, but the damned flora here is dangerous! I was attacked by vines! And I swear the forest itself smoothed out the damned wolf’s tracks so I couldn’t follow him!” Leonid’s gray eyes flashed with anger at this thought especially.

Rohan’s heart sank into his feet. If they could not track Tyreon and bring that bloody wolf back to the Wall, there was no way for them to get home and for Finn to be cured by a healer.

Not a human healer to be sure, Rohan thought and the wheels of his mind began to turn.

“What do we do? How do we get back without Tyreon?” Serxio had collapsed onto his knees on the ground.

Leonid ran a hand through his hair and wrenched out the leaves. “Perhaps the Wall opens at certain times. If we stay here and keep watch on it, we might have a chance of it opening again.”

“Finn does not have time for us to wait and hope,” Rohan stated simply.

The other two went still and looked down, ashamed that they had failed him, but they were not the ones who had caused this. Rohan stroked Finn’s forehead one more time before lifting the young man’s head from his lap. He lowered it gently onto one of the packs. Finn moaned and thrashed. Rohan’s heart clenched.

“I’m sorry, Finn,” Rohan murmured and leaned down to kiss his cheek. “But I must go find you some help.”

“Go?!” Serxio and Leonid cried at once.

Rohan rose up with Lightbringer in hand. He strapped it across his back. “We need a healer. A Fae one might do better than a human one in any case considering Finn’s… condition.”

“But you can’t just walk into a Fae village and ask for a healer!” Leonid cried.

“Actually, I *can*. I am versed in many of the Fae dialects,” Rohan stated.

“He is! He was just telling me all about it, but… but you’re *human*!” Serxio flapped his arms. “They’ll lock you up the moment they see you! Or worse, they’ll kill you on sight!”

“It’s said that not all the humans returned to Rirea before the Wall went up. I doubt we’re the only ones here. Besides,” Rohan drew the hood of his coat up, “I’ll keep this up and my head down. You two stay with Finn, and I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Leonid stepped in front of the exit to the tree. “I am sorry, my king, but I cannot allow you to do this. Let me go in your stead.”

“Do you know Ulsethi? Oetfati? Elean?” Rohan asked.

Leonid blinked. “I don’t even know what those are.”

“They are Fae dialects. I know them. I can converse with the Fae. You cannot, Leonid,” Rohan said gently as he clasped the Guard captain’s arm and pushed him to the side. “I need you to stay here and keep Finn safe while I’m gone.”

Leonid’s head lowered. “I don’t suppose there’s any way to convince you that… well, I know Finn means a lot to you, but you are king and he is--”

“Just as important as I am, Leonid,” Rohan finished for him, though that was not what Leonid was going to say.

“Yes, your majesty,” Leonid said tightly, not willing to gainsay him.

He put his hand on Leonid’s shoulder. “I know I am king, Leonid, but a king *serves* his people just like his people serve him or he is not worthy of the title.” He glanced over at the softly moaning Finn. “I do not know if I could forgive myself if I did not try everything to save Finn. Do you understand, Leonid?”

Leonid’s head lifted. “You are a good man. I would give my life for you even if you were not royal. That is why… well, please, be careful.”

Rohan nodded. “I will be. I promise.”

“If Leonid cannot go with you then I will!” Serxio had straightened up to his full--though not considerable--height. The plumes on his hat drooped, and he tried to blow them up, out of the way.

Both Leonid and Rohan stared at the young noble with slightly disbelieving looks.

“Serxio, though I am honored that you would like to assist me, I don’t think...” Rohan began.

“I know that I’m not a fighter. I don’t know any Fae dialects, but I am good at two things!” Serxio held up a finger. “First, I am a people person.”

“You think you can seduce a *Fae* when you can’t even speak their language?” Leonid’s right eyebrow curled up in disbelief.

Serxio sniffed. “Yes, I can! I seduced the Countess of Duchesney, and she did not speak a word of Common nor I of her language, and yet we are the best of friends.”

“You do have a way with people,” Rohan had to admit that.

When there was a difficult guest to be entertained, he always sent Serxio to warm them up before he got there. Invariably, men and women found the young noble entertaining, if nothing else, and he put them at ease. Serxio did have good instincts like that.

“And *second*?” Leonid was frowning. “You said there were two things.”

“I can run very fast,” Serxio said.

“Meaning?” Leonid was really frowning now. His whole face was a frown.

“That if we get into trouble I will run back to you, Leonid, so you know what’s going on and can save the king,” Serxio explained.

“If his majesty gets captured, you bloody well will too!” Leonid shook his head violently.

“No, I am actually as slippery as an eel. I will get away and come back here,” Serxio insisted. “The king cannot go alone, Leonid. And since I’m not good with weapons, someone who is needs to remain behind to protect Finn.”

“This is a terrible idea, my king,” Leonid growled.

“Perhaps.” Rohan considered Serxio’s words and good qualities. Perhaps he could help. Finally, he nodded and said, “All right, Serxio. You’ve proved your

worth in this, but the plumed hat has to go."

"My hat?" Serxio clutched it with both hands as if he or Leonid were about to snatch it from his head.

"And you need to wear a cloak. That outfit… *glows*," Rohan told him. The elaborate purple and green silk affair would attract too much attention. "We're trying to keep a low profile, Serxio."

"If you're really serious about helping his majesty, you won't balk at giving up some of your plumage," Leonid stated, still frowning. His Guard captain clearly did not like this plan one bit, but he realized that it was happening.

With a sigh, Serxio surrendered the hat and donned the gray patchwork cloak and hood that Leonid shrugged off of his own shoulders. The young lord didn't even grumble that it was muddy and stained--at least not too much--before pulling the hood over his head.

Rohan strode to the vine-covered entrance to the tree with Serxio at his heels. He glanced back one last time at Finn. The young man looked paler than ever and Rohan felt his heart being squeezed tighter in his chest.

I will save you, Finn, Rohan promised. *I swear it.*

DARK DREAM

I'm late! Finn Ashton thought as he frantically rode Sweetfire to the cabin in the woods. *Rohan is waiting for me! I can't miss him! I can't!*

Yet even as Finn thought this, he felt it was *wrong*, but he couldn't explain why. And yet he couldn't stop his racing thoughts long enough to figure out what it was that was bothering him. He had to get to the cabin, yet the Lupine Woods were actively working against him.

Some of the paths he followed doubled back on themselves, seeming to go in large circles, before he would find himself in the exact same spot he'd started from. He'd take other paths but those would come to dead ends at the base of one of the huge, poison-weeping trees or a cascade of impassable boulders. He'd even tried going off the paths altogether using his natural ability to navigate the woods to find the cabin. But it seemed his sense of direction had left him as well. No matter what direction he went, he ended back in the same place he had begun in the center of the woods with no cabin in sight.

And that was where he was now.

Sweetfire danced underneath him as Finn cast right then left to try and see if he had missed any sign of where he might go, but there was no direction he had not already gone, no path he had not already taken. He wheeled Sweetfire around to look behind him. Perhaps he wasn't even facing in the right direction to get to the cabin! But everything looked the same. A tremor ran through him and cold sweat poured down his face.

Which way? Which way? Which way?

He dragged his hands through his hair until it practically stood straight up. Sweetfire whinnied, mirroring his distress.

Rohan will wait, Finn told himself. *He won't leave right away just because I'm not there yet. But… but… didn't I already meet him?*

That sense of wrongness flooded him again and he went still. His breathing was the loudest sound in his ears, making it hard to think. But he forced himself to do so.

I didn't go into the woods alone, did I? No, Christopher and Miles were with me.

But his step brothers were not with him now. He saw and heard no sign of them.

That's because they abandoned me, Finn remembered, and his forehead furrowed while a frown alighted on his lips. *They ran away when they saw the white wolf, Tyreon.*

Finn started at this thought. Was that true? Had his step brothers deserted him? But why was he partially glad of this?

Because Rohan was there! Finn realized. *I met him unexpectedly. Only he wasn't alone either. He had people with him.*

But that didn't make sense! For if he'd already met with the noble lord, where were Rohan and his companions now? He knew that Rohan would not have abandoned him as Miles and Christopher would have without a second thought. And he was trying to *find* Rohan wasn't he? He was going to meet the lord at the cabin, but if he'd already met him then...

Finn's mind flailed with these two facts that could not both be true. More sweat coursed down his face. He felt weak and chilled. It wasn't just his thoughts that were *wrong*, but he, himself, was *wrong*.

I'm ill. Incredibly sick. I've never felt so bad. But Rohan will help me. I just have to get to him, Finn thought.

The woods were suddenly creaking and rustling all around him. His head snapped up. The trees had been ten feet away from him and Sweetfire on all sides. Now they were pressed up against him and the mare so closely that they couldn't even turn around.

What is going on here?

This was more weirdness than even the Lupine Woods was normally capable of, and yet, it was happening! They were trapped! But then a single path appeared before him. Where was he being led? But panic turned to relief as at the end of that path Finn caught sight of the cabin.

He dug his heels into Sweetfire's sides to urge her forward, but he hardly needed to. She whinnied, tossed her head and started trotting out of the woods, moving faster and faster until they burst out of the treeline and entered the small glade around the cabin at a full gallop. He pulled back hard on the reins. Sweetfire reared up. His legs felt so tired, but he managed to keep his seat in the saddle and not be thrown. The mare pawed the earth beneath her hooves, but finally settled down. He lifted a shaky hand to his brow. His fingers came back slick with clammy sweat. He truly was unwell and getting worse.

I've made it, he thought. *I can rest for a moment. When Rohan arrives, he'll help me. Maybe he's already here!*

The thought of Rohan holding him and stroking his fevered brow was so soothing. He could almost feel Rohan's strong but gentle hands on his aching body. This imagining was so real that he half expected to see Rohan beside him. But he was still seated upon the horse. Alone.

Shivering and in pain, he got down from Sweetfire on trembling legs. His right side screamed in agony, and he clutched at it. He breathed through the pain. In and out. Out and in. The pain retreated to a dull thrum. He slowly released his side. He half expected his hand to come away bloody, but there was nothing on his palm. He almost touched his side again to make sure he wasn't bleeding, but the memory of the pain kept his hand from going anywhere near that spot.

Sweetfire nosed his chest, aware that something was wrong with him and that he needed comfort. He leaned his forehead against hers. He didn't dare let go of her reins yet, because he needed her strength to keep on his feet. And she was so skittish that he worried she might run off.

His gaze slid to the path they had followed here, but it was gone! Finn's mouth went dry. There were *no* paths leading out of the glade. The tree trunks formed a solid fence around the cabin.

We're trapped here. The Lupine Woods aren't allowing us to leave, he realized. *How? Why? Did Rohan make it here? Perhaps I should hope he didn't.*

Finn's heart thundered in his chest. Sweetfire suddenly jerked on her reins. He glanced back at her and saw the first good thing that day. The glade was not the muddy brown and black he remembered from just the day before. It was covered by

lush, green grass. Sweetfire stuffed her snout into the grass and began to eat with relish. Normally, she wouldn't touch anything in the Lupine Woods but the berries he found for her. Yet the grass looked healthy and, evidently, was tasty too.

"Hey, hey, slow down or you'll have a stomach ache, Sweetfire," he teased.

She nickered around a mouthful of grass, but didn't stop eating. He had to pull her head up to take out the bit so she could really get down to eating. The moment he did, she was back at it. He shook his head and laughed. His heart, which had been beating wildly before, started to slow its rapid rhythm, but he did not altogether become calm. They were still trapped here after all.

He turned towards the cabin. The structure looked actually *inviting*. He could see a golden glow stemming from a merrily crackling fire. He caught sight, too, of a candelabra with tall, tapering candles lit in the corner. Its light spilled out of the doorway. Also in view was the corner of a colorful picnic blanket and a wicker basket overflowing with food inside. There were dark purple, globe-like grapes hanging over the basket's side. A loaf of crusty bread was planted like a flag in the basket. Hard salamis bloomed beside the bread ready to be sliced. His stomach grumbled. Could that food be for just them? But, more importantly, it meant that Rohan was *here*. It was strange though that the noble lord had not come out to greet him.

"Rohan?" Finn called as he undid the saddle and lifted it off of Sweetfire's back. The mare gave a grateful nicker. As he was walking to the lean-to in order to hang it up, he called out again, "Rohan, it's Finn! I'm sorry I'm late!" He slung the saddle over the back low wall. "I got lost! I've never gotten lost before." It was more than getting lost. "The paths… they kept leading me astray, and now they're all gone. Did that happen to you? Rohan?"

Finn turned his head back towards the doorway of the cabin as he heard a *creak*. For a moment, his heart--which had still not settled--was back at a gallop, and he tasted the sick, metallic taste of fear in his mouth. His instincts were telling him to run.

There was a figure standing just inside of the cabin's doorway. The light should have shown who he was. But instead the figure appeared made of pure darkness. Watching him.

Run.

Run.

Run.

But if it was Rohan...

"R-Rohan?" Finn took a step back, cursing himself that he had unsaddled Sweetfire. But where could he have gone? There were no paths out of the glade.

And then the figure stepped forward and it *was* Rohan, smiling at him broadly. The noble lord bounded down the steps, arms outstretched. "Finn!"

Finn's back hit Sweetfire's side. She whinnied--annoyed--that he was disturbing her meal. But though seeing it was Rohan should have steadied him, Finn still felt the urge to flee.

It's Rohan! He would never hurt me! I know it!

Yet his heart was like a drumbeat that told him to *run, run, run*.

When he saw Finn retreating, Rohan tilted his handsome head to the side and asked, "Finn, what's wrong? Are you all right? You… you look peaked. Are you not feeling well?"

Why is my heart still beating like I'm facing an enemy?

"Rohan, I… Yes, I'm not feeling well. Everything is… *wrong*," Finn said.

He was drenched with cold sweat and shivering actively now. Rohan's blue eyes widened with concern. He held his right hand out towards Finn as he approached slowly as if Finn was a skittish animal. And he wasn't wrong. Finn's instincts were on high alert, but there was no reason for that. It was Rohan! Finn forced himself to stay where he was as Rohan put that outstretched hand against his forehead. The faint frown turned into a deep one when Rohan dropped that hand on Finn's shoulder.

"You're burning up, Finn," Rohan said. "Come inside by the fire. I'll wrap you in blankets."

"Yes, yes, I'd like that."

He would more than like that. Such an indulgence to have a blanket at all, let alone to be cocooned in one before a fire was practically unknown to him. He wasn't ill often, but when he was, it was severe.

"A little wine will help you as well, I think," Rohan said as he slipped that hand from Finn's shoulder to his lower back and gently led him towards the cabin.

"W-wine?" Finn allowed himself to lean into Rohan's touch. It centered him. Calmed him. At least, his heart had slowed down.

It must be this illness that's making my heart race so.

"Yes, rich, red wine from my own cellars! Nothing better to chase away illness than the fermented grape," Rohan told him.

"I've only ever had a sip or two. The wine's kept for…" Finn stopped himself. Rohan knew he was a servant, but it was best not to emphasize that. "For special occasions."

"Well, I believe every time we are together *is* a special occasion." Rohan smiled down at him.

Finn managed a smile back. "Yes, I agree."

Rohan got him inside the cabin. The interior was darker than the noontime outdoors, but it was cozy. The fire was roaring. There was not one but three candelabras placed strategically in the room so that everything was illuminated by a soft, golden glow. Rohan had also made a nest right before the fire for them. The blanket he'd seen from outside was nothing compared to what was there.

There were piles of furs that looked even finer than the stuff that lined the cloak Rohan had gifted him. There were over a dozen pillows in jewel tone colors. In addition to the nest, there was that overflowing picnic basket. Finn also caught sight of several bottles of wine and two crystal goblets. There were soft, ripe cheeses on a cutting board. Not to mention that there was a grate over the fire and two steaks seasoned with salt and pepper waiting to be cooked.

"Rohan!" Finn gasped. "You didn't have to do all of this!"

As if to bely his words, his stomach gave another audible gurgle. That caused Rohan to chuckle.

"I rather think I did. You need sustenance," Rohan stated, "and if you're fighting off an illness you definitely require good food. Now *sit*."

Finn nearly collapsed into the center of the blanket nest when Rohan pushed down on his shoulders. His hands splayed out on the fur blankets. They were so soft. He nearly jumped when Rohan came up behind him and slipped one of the fur blankets over his shoulders.

"Oh, thank you!" Finn cried.

He drew the blanket around himself and turned towards the fire. He stretched his hands out, expecting to feel the heat of the flames, but, at first, there was no heat at all. Finn blinked and frowned.

"Something wrong?" Rohan asked.

"The fire… it's not hot," Finn stated uncertainly.

"What? Finn, you truly are ill if you can't feel the fire's heat," Rohan said.

And then, Finn's hands were blasted by warmth. "Ah, yes, you're right. I don't know what I was thinking."

"It's all right. We'll get you back on the mend in no time," Rohan assured him.

Finn huddled further into the blankets, but he was still chilled.

Rohan studied him carefully, and he smiled. "You look like a little bird in a nest."

"I feel like that. I'm sorry I'm… I'm not myself," Finn told him.

Finn swallowed down the alarm building in him. He must be very ill indeed for him to be thinking such irrational things such as a fire not giving out heat. The perception that the woods were locking him in this glade was likely a hallucination too. Thank goodness Rohan was here to take care of him!

Even as he looked at the spread of food and wine and blankets and pillows, he had a flash of memory: Rohan with two other men on horses facing him, Miles and Christopher. Rohan and his companion's saddlebags were stuffed to the gills with these *exact* things: blankets, pillows, candelabras, and several picnic baskets tied to their saddles.

A romantic picnic.

How had Rohan gotten all of this here himself if that was not true? It was impossible for a horse to draw a cart through the woods even if one wasn't hallucinating and the paths had cooperated. He realized that he hadn't seen Tempest outside. So how had Rohan gotten himself here at all, let alone everything else?

Maybe his friends took Tempest with them and are hiding out of sight? Finn thought. *But why? None of this makes any sense!*

"Finn?" Rohan was offering him a goblet of wine.

"Oh, sorry!"

Finn took the goblet from him. He stared down into his contents. It was likely a deep red color but, in the firelight, it looked almost black.

Like one of Christopher's deadly potions.

With that comparison, he decided he would not drink it.

"What are you thinking about?" Rohan asked almost playfully, but there was the slightest bit of sharpness in his eyes.

"I was just wondering how you got all of this here." Finn brought the wine to his lips, but didn't drink even though it smelled of ripe berries. Yet there was a faint scent of *decay* about the wine too, which had his nose wrinkling. He quickly brought it down, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand as if he had drunk from it. "I didn't see Tempest outside. I'm sure that Sweetfire is missing him… even though she's being a pig with the grass."

Rohan took a deep sip of his wine, evidently not finding anything objectionable about it. His eyes twinkled above the rim of the goblet, but Finn could have sworn that he was drinking to give himself time to think of an answer. Finally, he lowered the goblet, and he, too, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand just as Finn had. Had he really drunk the wine either?

This is crazy! What am I thinking? That Rohan put something into the wine? That he's faking drinking so I'll feel safe about drinking some myself?

"Don't worry about Tempest. He's fine," Rohan stated with a chuckle.

And yet those words *did* make him worried about the stallion. It seemed downright odd to him that Rohan would act so careless about his beloved warhorse. Or he had *seemed* beloved to Rohan yesterday.

What do I really know about Rohan? Finn reminded himself. *Nothing, really. Maybe he is not as attached to Tempest as he seemed… but no, no, I'm sure he was. The affection wasn't feigned.*

"Aren't you going to drink your wine, Finn?" Rohan asked. When Finn lifted his head to look at him, Rohan's stare was quite intent. "If you don't like this one, I have others."

He gestured towards the other unopened bottles. The bottles looked black and around their necks had strange knotted cords with red beads.

"N-no, this is fine!" Finn lied as he carefully brought the goblet to his mouth and barely touched his top lip to the liquid. There was a burning sensation that had him jerking the goblet away and spilling the wine on the ground. "Oh! I'm sorry!"

"No need to apologize. Let me take that and clean you up."

Rohan took the goblet from him and set it to the side before dabbing up the wine that had spilled. This action brought him very close to Finn's face. Rohan's eyes hooded. But the look was not like the ones of desire he'd given Finn the other day. This one was *predatory*, almost frightening, and Finn turned his head, pretending he was seeing something outside of the cabin to break the moment. When he looked back, Rohan had moved away.

This isn't right! I wouldn't feel this way with Rohan…

But he did feel this way. Finn ran a shaking hand over his cold, clammy forehead. He was sick. That was the only explanation for seeing evil in Rohan.

"Are you sure that Tempest is all right?" Finn asked again, if for no other reason than to make conversation.

"He is. But to reveal where he is would be to give away my secrets. My *magic*," Rohan chuckled again. "You wouldn't want that, would you?"

Finn blushed and lowered his head. Rohan was being playful, not threatening. So he answered, "No, I suppose not. Though, again, you did not have to do all of this."

"It is not a hardship! It is hardly anything at all. But sit and rest. I need to get the steaks on the grill," Rohan said as he shifted towards the fire.

Finn stared into the fire and considered Rohan's earlier words. Actually, *one* word in particular. "Magic."

"Hmmmm?"

Rohan had speared one of the thick, two-inch steaks and placed it on the grill over the fire. The meat hissed and sizzled as it came in contact with the hot metal. The scent was heavenly. Finn drew in a deep breath and wished he could memorize it for later so he could recreate it in his mind. Beef was beyond expensive, and they had only one cow on the estate. She was a precious thing named Annabelle that was petted and loved. Her milk was sacred on the estate and she would only be slaughtered when she was old and her meat was tough and stringy. This meat that Rohan was cooking was anything but. This meat was marbled with fat. Finn's mouth was watering and the maddening scent nearly had him forgetting what he had said.

"Finn?" Rohan said, his voice in a sing-song amused tone. "Have I lost you to the steak?"

Finn blinked rapidly. "Oh, yes, I'm afraid so. Beef is… my favorite."

"Then I can't wait to feed you every bite." Rohan focused on the steaks, making sure that the flesh and fat caramelized but did not burn. "So you asked me about… *magic*. What's on your mind?"

Finn was focused on the steaks again, watching how the fat crisped. "I was actually wondering what you thought about it."

Rohan blew a long, wavy, blond lock back that had fallen in front of his eyes. "Magic is the realm of the Fae. Are you certain you want to talk to *me* about that?"

Finn blinked and curled forward slightly. "Why not you? You didn't seem to--to hate the Fae when we spoke about them yesterday."

Rohan glanced over at him and there was the strangest expression on his face. His eyes reflected the fire, even though he was looking away from it. Finn tensed, but then Rohan blinked and the fires were gone from his blue eyes--if they had ever been there before--and he was smiling.

"I am glad you feel comfortable speaking to me about magic and the Fae. I want you to feel you can," Rohan said softly. "It's just a taboo subject among humans."

"Among… among *us*, you mean," Finn said even as his heart started to thump again.

"Yes, us. I mean us." Rohan laughed lightly. "But you were asking me about magic and my thoughts on it."

"Yes, what do you think of it?"

"Blessing or curse?" A smile played on Rohan's lips. "I suppose both depending on who you are and what type of magic you have."

"There's more than one type?" Finn perked up.

He thought of what Christopher had said about how he would have learned everything there was to know about magic if he were in Finn's place. Finn suddenly wanted to do just that. He just hadn't thought that Rohan would know much about it. Yet what a wonderful thing if he did! Who else could Finn talk to, outside of those on the estate, of magic? And even there, he had to be careful because they knew he could perform it. Rohan did not so he might not be so guarded about telling Finn everything he knew.

"There is." Rohan nodded as he poked the steaks with a long fork to see if they could be flipped. "Most Fae magic comes from life."

"From life? You mean *nature*, don't you?"

"No, I mean *life*. The living part of nature," Rohan corrected and his voice was crisp, very unlike Rohan in a lot of ways, but Finn didn't trust his judgment. His illness had affected everything so far. "But the most powerful Fae mages--rarer than diamonds--draw from *death*."

"Death?" Finn breathed.

He thought of how he took life from the land, mixed it with his magic, and caused it all to bloom. He drew magic from life clearly, but why did a niggle of doubt tug at him? Rohan's next words confirmed that the doubt was perhaps justified.

"Yes, you see Death Mages drain life from the land, from animals and, of course, from *people*," Rohan told him as he flipped the steaks. The fire sizzled and snapped as liquid fat dropped into the flames. "They can create incredible spells, spells that normal Fae can only dream of."

"But at what cost?" Finn swallowed as he thought of how easy it was to draw in life and then cause the estate to bloom. The more life, the more he was able to do.

"At what *cost*?" Rohan repeated and laughed mirthlessly.

The sound was so sharp and jarring that Finn flinched at the sound. It wasn't at all like Rohan! But perhaps his illness was making him too sensitive. He glanced at the door and saw that the woods were still so tightly packed that there was no way out.

This isn't right! He thought for nearly the dozenth time.

"What would you pay to have this moment?" Rohan asked.

Finn blinked. The steaks were no longer giving out the delicious smell. The fire gave no warmth again. The blankets on his shoulders had no weight.

Finn licked his suddenly very dry lips. "This moment…"

"Your dreams are so… *small*." Rohan gestured around them. "You don't even dream of being in his estate, but instead you dream of *here*. A hovel. A shack. It's hardly that, even. A warm fire and a bit of meat. *This* is the extent of your dreams?"

Finn's mouth fell open. Rohan would never speak like this! He would never mock him! That wasn't in his heart. Such cynicism. Such sourness. Such acidity. And he spoke of "Rohan" as someone else…

This isn't Rohan, Finn realized with startling clarity. His mind and body had been trying to tell him this the whole time. *This isn't the cabin. This is all wrong.*

"Who are you?" Finn asked as he tried to rise to his feet, but his legs were too weak to hold his weight. He sank back down with a moan.

It was then that Rohan's blond locks changed. They went white-snow white--and grew much longer. They tumbled down his shoulders to the middle of his back. The piercing blue eyes were suddenly stained red.

Red as fires.

Red as rubies.

Red as blood.

Rohan's body became leaner but also taller. The face changed to the delicate yet masculine features of a Fae. Even though Finn had only seen them in his dreams, he *knew* these features. Yet he could not place them.

"My name is Marikoth," the Fae's voice was rich and royal and yet filled with scorn. "But the real question, Finn, is who are *you*?"

THE WEBS WE WEAVE

"How are we going to get in there?" Serxio whispered, his voice going high and tight as they surveyed the Fae village.

They were concealed in thick underbrush about twenty feet from the village's edge. Leaves as large as Rohan's head grabbed at him as if they were predators, blocking his view of the village. The ground also crawled with vines and the massive trees creaked and loomed all around them like enemy soldiers. Unlike the Lupine Woods where plants and trees grew stunted and twisted when they grew at all, here life exploded everywhere. There wasn't a square inch that wasn't seething with vegetation, animals or insects.

Rohan again pulled down one of those massive leaves from in front of his face to get a clear view of the village. He hadn't expected Fae architecture to look exactly like what he had seen in the books in his castle's library--and since this was just a *village*, he had guessed it would potentially look less elegant and imposing--but he was wrong on all counts.

The village was lit by massive glowing mushrooms that stood four times his own height and had caps with delicate fluting undersides. They rained blue and green light over white stone paths that let out their own ghostly luminescence. The houses he could see were made of silver-colored wood with slate roofs. There were few sharp angles with everything taking on flowing, natural curves. Most homes were multiple stories with balconies that jutted out from every floor making the outdoors as much a part of the home as the indoors.

Winding staircases connected the balconies on the outside. They were covered so even when it rained they could be used without fear of getting wet. Gutters lined the edges of the balconies and rainwater was sent into the streams that criss-crossed through the village. Delicate arching bridges went over these burbling brooks and Rohan could see fish leaping into the air. He thought of his uncle's statement about how the fish in Bolan jumped into its citizen's nets. While Hugues might have been exaggerating about that kingdom, here it looked to be true.

The Empire teemed with *life*. In fact there was almost too much, and maybe that was the reason for the difference between what he had seen in his books and the reality on the ground. For around the entirety of the village were black metal pillars that he had not seen or read about. Fae writing, in a dialect Rohan didn't know, was etched into their matte finish. The letters glowed redly. Stretched between these pillars was a delicate-as-starlight, translucent magical web of the same red color.

Rohan watched as a questing vine crawled from the forest towards the village and touched one of the red strands. There was a *snap!* And then a *hiss!* The vine lay blackened and smoking on the ground. It curled like a shriveled snake skin under a baking, desert sun. As Rohan looked more carefully, he realized that there were dozens upon dozens of these shriveled vines on the ground between the forest and

the village.

"They have Battle Mages at the entrance to the village. Is that normal?" Serxio asked.

Serxio was referring to the one entrance into the village that they could see. It was the one place where the magical web did not block the way inside. But it was guarded by two, formidable-looking Fae Battle Mages. They were dressed in red and black flowing robes supplemented with armored greaves and braces that were etched with Fae writing that glittered with magic. Two-handed longswords were strapped to their backs. Daggers with curving blades were slid into sheaths at their waists. Both of them also carried long, polished, wooden staffs with jewels stuck into the ends.

"Is there something *special* about this village that they have so much security?" Serxio continued.

"I cannot imagine what it would be," Rohan answered hesitantly.

"But the wall and all of these Battle Mages… it seems like overkill for a place with what? A few hundred inhabitants?"

The village was small. They had been lucky to find it in the vast forest. Luckily, Rohan's tracking skills had led them to a road, which had further taken them to this village. They'd circled the entirety of the settlement, looking for breaks in the magical wall or another less guarded entrance, but they hadn't discovered either. The village was locked up tight.

Two more Battle Mages rounded the corner of the village. One of them had his hands outstretched to the sides. A reddish mist was flowing from his armored fingers that flowed over the ground. When the red mist cleared, there was more dead vegetation. The trees nearest the mist seemed to lean away from it.

"I think the village is under siege," Rohan whispered to Sergio.

"From who?" Serxio asked, his face turning towards Rohan and looking like a pale bloom in the darkness.

Rohan felt a vine close around his ankle. He brought out his dagger and viciously cut it. The vine let out what almost sounded like a whine as greenish-yellowish ichor flowed from the cut ends. The wounded vine slithered back into the forest.

"Not who. *What*. From the forest itself," Rohan answered as both he and Serxio looked at where the vine had been. "Something is *very* wrong here."

"Like what's happened to Rirea?" Serxio asked.

"Not exactly the same. Nothing grows for us, but here… life is bursting at the seams, but it's become *predatory*," Rohan stated.

"So does this mean the Fae and the Wall aren't responsible for what's happening to Rirea?" Serxio asked.

"Not necessarily. Perhaps what's happening here is because they are stealing life from our side. It has nowhere to go," Rohan stated.

"Think of how much they must hate us though if that is true." Serxio shook his head. "To be prisoners in their own villages? To need Battle Mages to patrol all the time? Think about what they have given up to make us suffer. It's inconceivable."

He was right. From what Rohan could see, this village and maybe every single one like it had to protect itself from the very vegetation around it. Knowing how much the Fae were attuned to nature and loved it so, Rohan couldn't imagine that this wasn't adversely affecting them. Another vine crawled atop his boot and Rohan stomped it into paste.

"We can't stay here," Rohan said with a grimace.

“Well, we can’t very well saunter past those Battle Mages!” Serxio rightly pointed out. “What do we do? Look for another village? Go back to the tree?”

Rohan’s heart clenched in his chest. Every moment that Finn was without a healer was one more moment that he was that much closer to dying. Going back without a healer was not an option. Finding another village? Even if they could...

“I do not believe we have time to--wait! What is that?” Rohan pointed towards a point within the village.

Three Fae in rich purple silk robes walked stately down the main avenue of the village towards the entrance. The Battle Mages stepped to the side and bowed their heads as this procession exited the village. Behind those Fae were four others, but these people were dressed in pure white. They were also shackled at the wrists and ankles and were connected to one another with thick chains.

“Humans!” Serxio hissed and half stood up from their hiding place. “The prisoners are humans, Rohan!”

Rohan reached over and yanked Serxio down just before he was spotted. One of the nearest Battle Mages narrowed his crimson eyes and took a step towards them, but another caught his shoulder and pointed to the procession who had split off from the main road and were marching down what looked like a lesser-used path into the forest. Those large mushrooms lined this path, covering it in an eerie but beautiful glow.

“There are *humans* here, Rohan! And the Fae--what are they doing with them? Why are they bound? Are they prisoners? Slaves? Sacrifices?” Serxio asked as he brought shaking hands up to his chin.

Rohan had idly spoken about there being humans in the Empire after the Wall came up, but he hadn’t exactly considered what life would be like for them here. The books he’d read about the Fae had always warned him that they made *deals* with humans and other species. These deals would be in the form of service in exchange for untold riches or spells. But the way they were phrased tricked the person taking the deal in some way, making it so that their service never ended, or the treasure was cursed, or the spell blew back on them.

The Fae were said to prey on others’ weaknesses: selfishness, greed, gluttony, cruelty, and more. His uncle had explained this when telling him why his parents hadn’t outlawed such deals. Basically, the people who entered into them did so for bad purposes and got their just rewards. But seeing those wide, hunted eyes in the humans that were bound together, being led into the forest for who knew what, it didn’t matter if these people had done something evil to get here. Rohan had to rescue them.

“Oh, this isn’t good!” Serxio rubbed his hands together as he glanced between the entrance to the village and the retreating backs of the other Fae. “There are still two Battle Mages at the entrance while the other two have continued on with the procession!”

Rohan gritted his teeth. Potentially he could take down two Battle Mages. *Potentially.* If he was successful, they could get inside the village and find a healer. But fighting with the Fae would cause a commotion. Yet it wouldn’t be just two Battle Mages he had to face, but the whole village. And what if that caused the other Battle Mages to come running back? That *potential* win would turn into a *definite* failure. The irony to top it all off would be if there wasn’t even a healer in the village. If he died here there would be no help for Finn at all. And then there was the fact that bound humans were being taken into the forest. He doubted that they would be coming back.

“Why did this village have to have Battle Mages?” Serxio hissed. “Of all the villages in all of the Fae empire--

“We’re going to follow the procession,” Rohan interrupted.

There was a pause and Serxio asked softly, “But the healer…”

“I’m not giving up on Finn, but there’s no getting into the village right now. And we need to know what they are doing to those humans,” Rohan said and started after the procession.

“Maybe we’ll find that helping one is helping the other. The Fae do look rather healer-ish, don’t they? The ones in purple and gold, I mean,” Serxio said as he hustled after Rohan.

“Perhaps. I think they look rather like priests of some sort,” Rohan stated as they kept within the shelter of the forest’s thick underbrush and followed along the path after the procession. “My understanding is that the Fae have holidays at the changing of the seasons. Winter is leaving, and Spring has come. I think--and I’m guessing here--but maybe whatever they’re doing has something to do with that.”

“How can you tell that the seasons are changing?” Serxio muttered as he pulled off sticky leaves that clung to his worn cloak. “I mean can you even imagine if there were *more* life here than there already is? If this isn’t even spring?”

Rohan could, and he wouldn’t have wanted to be here then.

“Did you hear that?” Serxio gripped his shoulder.

There had been a cracking somewhere to their right. Rohan’s gaze had already swung in that direction, but he saw nothing. The same undergrowth that kept them out of sight kept whatever was making that noise invisible too.

“Keep moving. I don’t want to lose sight of the procession,” Rohan said and picked up the pace again.

Soon they reached a clearing where there was a single white standing stone about ten-feet tall situated in the exact center. The four humans were lined up around the stone. The chains around their ankles and wrists were now connected to metal rings that were pounded into the pillar. The humans’ faces were as white as snow. Tears streaked cheeks and dripped off of their chins. One of them was shaking so badly that their chains made a jingling sound. Another fell to their knees, dragging the others nearly down with them.

“Please, please, please,” a woman with large brown eyes begged in the Fae tongue. “I swear I didn’t poison anyone! It was a mistake. I used the milsa berries in the soup! I swear!”

A man with a shock of black hair cried also in Fae, “I was framed! I didn’t steal! I would never do that!”

The man down on his knees wept, and though he might have been trying to say something, all that came out were burbling cries.

The woman who was shaking like a leaf pleaded through chattering teeth, “I admit to hurting the child. He teased me endlessly. It was just a few smacks! That’s all! I don’t deserve this punishment! Besides, I’m all skin and bones. No flesh on me. No flesh! Choose another! Please!”

Flesh and bones? What does that matter? Rohan wondered with a chill corkscrewing down his spine.

The humans’ cries and protestations were ignored. The three Fae in the purple and gold robes faced the back of the clearing with the pillar between them and the thick foliage. They weren’t looking at the humans but at the forest itself. Their aspect was one of fear and reverence. Rohan realized that there weren’t just the overgrown mushrooms, sticky leaves and massive tree trunks behind the pillar but strands of a thick, gray substance that looped around the trunks and branches,

making this area of the forest even darker than the rest. Rohan frowned. Those strands looked familiar, but they couldn't be what he was thinking.

The priestly Fae lifted their hands to the sky in unison and green globes that burned like witchfire left their palms and streaked up into the night sky before curving downwards and landing in the dark woods where the gray strands were.

Almost as if they are trying to signal something, Rohan thought uneasily.

If he had expected some ceremony he would have been sorely disappointed as the priestly Fae and the Battle Mages quickly turned and fled back down the path, leaving the humans tied to the pillar. Rohan's frown grew deeper as he waited to see if anything would emerge from the forest, but nothing did. The Fae had left the humans alone and this gave Rohan and Serxio a chance to save them. It was almost too good to be true.

"Come on, Serxio! This is our moment!" Rohan called as he burst out of the foliage and into the clearing.

The humans were still crying and pleading for their lives. It was the man on his knees who saw them first. His mouth gaped open like a fish's. He opened and closed it, but no words came out. The woman whose chains had shaken with her fear let out a gasp of shock. The other two froze and they cried at the sight of him and Serxio.

"Who are you?"

"Where did you come from?"

"Can you break the bonds?"

"Oh, by the gods, you have weapons!"

All of these statements and questions flew fast and furious at them.

"We can help you. I'll explain everything else later," Rohan told them, which quieted them down.

"Rohan, these bonds are metal!" Serxio held up one woman's hands that lifted up her nearest neighbor's as well. He pulled on it with all his might, bracing one foot on the ground and the other against the pillar itself, but the metal didn't give an inch. "It's impossible to break them!"

"You can't leave us here!" The brown-haired women screamed. "It's coming! It's coming!"

"What's coming?" Serxio asked.

There was a scuttling sound somewhere beyond the nearest trees.

"Do not despair." Rohan unsheathed his sword. "Lightbringer should be able to cut through them. It is spelled to break most materials, Serxio."

The Fae runes on the blade burned hotly. The sword seemed to vibrate with power and some of that power flowed into him. This had never happened before, but Rohan did not feel alarmed in the least. This felt *right*.

"Hurry! Hurry! HURRY, MAN!" The black-haired man cried.

There was more scuttling. Branches shook all around them as if something heavy--or perhaps many somethings--were jumping from one branch to another. Rohan caught sight of shiny bodies the size of plump pigs moving in the corner of his eye.

What is in this forest?

"Do something! Don't leave us to die!" The woman who had been shaking shouted.

Rohan focused himself and commanded, "Place your hands against the pillar and move as far apart as you can from one another!"

They did as he said on trembling legs with their chains jangling with their fear. Rohan brought Lightbringer up, but he paused at the top of the swing as the soft

rustling became much louder near where the green orbs had fallen to earth.

"It's almost upon us!" One of the men shrieked.

"What is *it*?" Serxio asked, eyes scanning everywhere.

"I don't want to die! I'm innocent! Innocent, I say!" the kneeling man blubbered.

Rohan did not wait to see if they answered Serxio. Instead, he turned back to his task. He brought Lightbrighter down. There was a flash of light and the chains were sheared through. He struck again and again, severing chains, but there were so many. He had not yet managed to free one person before there was a *splat*! sound. He'd moved instinctively to the right just as a five-inch diameter mass of gray material appeared on the ground where he had just been standing.

Seeing it up close, he now knew what it was, but it should not have been possible.

It was *webbing*.

But spiders aren't that big! Rohan thought before he turned his head, and he realized how very wrong he was about that.

FAMILY

Finn tried to stagger to his feet again to escape Marikoth. The Fae watched him with amusement, not trying to stop him, but not looking worried that he was going to get away either. Marikoth was right to be confident, for Finn's legs collapsed underneath him once more before he got halfway to his feet. He lay in a collapsed heap, his breathing coming in quick gasps and his heart hammering in his chest. His side was screaming with pain, and he was exhausted from the simple act of trying to stand. He stared up at Marikoth with huge eyes. What did the Fae want? Whatever it was, it couldn't be good.

"I would not strain yourself, Finn," Marikoth advised with a wag of one long finger. "Your body really cannot take much more."

"What--what are you talking about?" Finn got out between gasps.

Marikoth dropped down to his haunches so that they were eye to eye. He studied Finn for long, silent moments before proclaiming with simple sincerity, "You're dying, Finn."

Finn, who had been frozen like a field mouse in front of a cat, fell back from Marikoth. He lay sprawled out on his wounded side. Fresh agony from his side had him curling in a ball. The fur blanket that had seemed so comforting before now felt like bonds.

"No! No!" Finn cried, his heart clenching. "That's not true! That's not possible!"

"You put yourself between a bolt and Tyreon." Marikoth made a movement with his hands to indicate that Finn had been shot through and through. "Your body is failing. Not from blood loss or even the wound itself, but from the bolts themselves. Your beloved Rohan has his silver bolts spelled against Fae."

The shock of Marikoth knowing he had Fae blood was blotted out for a moment. A memory came to Finn of searing pain in his side. It was pain beyond anything he had experienced. The world had spun and then gone black even as he heard Rohan screaming his name.

He thrust that memory to the side and denied, "I'm not--"

"Not *Fae*? I have eyes that can *see*." Marikoth's red eyes suddenly glowed like embers.

Magic, Finn thought. *I cannot lie to him. He'll know.*

"The blood you seek to deny is killing you, Finn. There is no doubt about it," Marikoth said almost with sympathy.

Finn reached down to where the remembered pain had come from and felt something *wet* this time. When he brought his hand up there was a crimson stain on his palm. His eyes widened, and his breathing once more became staccato gasps. He wiped his hand on his shirt, smearing it with red fingermarks.

Am I dying? Finn asked himself.

He listened to his labored breathing and his heart's shocky rhythm. He was very unwell, to be sure, but there was something *more*. A sinking weight inside of him as if his soul was being slowly pulled out of his body.

He's right. I am dying, Finn realized.

The thought was more numbing than terrifying. He believed that there was something after this life, but then he felt a swelling rage that he would be leaving this life so soon after he'd begun it. So soon after he'd found one bright light in Rohan.

And Rohan will never forgive himself if I die, Finn knew as well, *even though it is not his fault.*

He was certain that even if he and Rohan had not made love the other day, Rohan would have felt crushing guilt over killing anyone he had not intended to.

"How do you know all of this, Marikoth?" Finn asked. "Why do you know what's happened to me?"

The Fae shrugged. "You drew my attention, so I've been watching you."

"What about me drew your attention?" Finn asked, trying to act nonchalant even, though he was certain he knew.

Marikoth sensed him taking life from beyond the Wall. Why, oh why had he done that? Because he was afraid of his stepfather? Being helpless in front of this beautiful, deadly creature made his stepfather seem so… weak.

"Must we play this game?" Marikoth asked. When Finn didn't say anything, he let out an exaggerated sigh and said, "You stole something that was not yours. Life from beyond the Wall."

"Why do you care? Was it yours?" Finn asked, deciding playing dumb was not going to work with Marikoth.

The Fae tipped back his handsome head and laughed. It was a tinkling, joyous sound yet it caused the hair on the back of Finn's neck to stand on end.

"Oh, Finn, you really are something!" The Fae looked at him almost fondly.

Finn didn't see what was so funny. Besides, he needed to get out of here.

But where is here? It looks like the Lupine Woods, but it isn't, Finn thought.

"Why did you put yourself between that bolt and Tyreon? What is the King of Wolves to you?" Marikoth asked.

Finn opened dry lips to answer, but no words came out. He realized he was parched. Probably blood loss. He looked around for that wine, but he didn't see it. That was probably a good thing. Marikoth was clearly evil, not to mention Fae. He didn't even try to stop the prejudice inside of him from flowing. This Fae had pretended to be Rohan and tricked him into… into what? He didn't know. But if he hadn't figured it out, he was certain that Marikoth would have used his caring for Rohan against him. Best to tell this being *nothing*.

Is it Marikoth's curiosity holding me here? Assuming Marikoth is not a figment of my imagination, Finn quickly amended.

But he knew Marikoth was not. He was very real and very separate from Finn. There was something about him that disturbed Finn greatly. Marikoth was … *wild*? Untamed? A little mad? Maybe all of those things.

But I think he knows the way out of here. And I need to get out, Finn thought..

Marikoth was studying him again with those strange yet compelling, crimson eyes. "Why save Tyreon? But, then again, why did Tyreon open the Wall for you in the first place?" Then with another wave, Marikoth spoke more to himself than to Finn, "Unless my good brother has realized that you drained some of his land's life? He probably thinks it was me. Interesting. I suppose using you as a cat's paw is a reason to let you live. But… there are so many reasons not to."

Finn swallowed. He *had* been right. Marikoth was mad. Who else would so calmly talk about killing someone in front of them? It was like he thought that Finn was so weak, so negligible that there was nothing Finn could do against him. The hot coal in his chest from the other night with Christopher lit, but this time it was more than a coal, it was a *fire*. It shocked Finn by how much stronger it was, but Finn wasn't sure what he could do with it. He couldn't let the Fae know about it. He had to continue to look feeble and innocent. In a way, both were easy as they were true.

"Why would you k-kill me? I'm just a servant! I'm no one!" Finn cried. The breathlessness and weakness of his voice did not have to be feigned.

Marikoth laughed, "You're a terrible liar! You're no one? With the ability to drain life from beyond my brother's Wall? How absurd!"

Finn winced. Hadn't Christopher said much the same thing to him many times? His eldest stepbrother and this Marikoth seemed similar somehow. They were both intelligent, frightening and fragile in some way.

They're both outsiders, Finn thought. *They don't fit in at all.*

"You're on the Fae side of the Wall, you know," Marikoth murmured. "Right now, you're unconscious and dying and you're still telling lies when there really is no need to any longer."

Finn stared hard at the cabin and the woods out of the doorway. Everything seemed so *real*. He frowned.

"Then why am I here? Seeing this--" he began.

"This is a *dream*. Your dream actually," Marikoth said almost wearily. "It's not *real*."

Finn's mouth was so terribly dry, and his side ached. It was more than his side actually. His veins hurt as if acid were coursing through them and not just blood. Yet, despite this pain being quite anchoring, the walls of the cabin grew translucent for a moment. Finn's eyes widened. The walls then snapped back into full reality.

This is a dream! He's not lying about that! Finn thought. *My dream. But I don't have control of it, do I? Can't I wake myself up?*

"You're in the Empire of the Eclipse Throne, which is dangerous enough on its own," Marikoth repeated. "But that is nothing compared to the magical poison racing through your veins."

Finn risked looking down at his hands. There were black lines under his skin that tracked his veins and arteries.

"I don't understand," Finn whispered. "If this is a dream… how are you here?"

"Magic." There was a faint mocking in Marikoth's voice. When Finn didn't react, he sighed. "I am able to be here because you are close to death. Think of this as less a dream than a doorway, and you have one foot over the threshold. And I am all about death."

He thought of what Marikoth had said about Death Magic earlier. "You use Death Magic?"

"Yes, clever boy. I am the only user of Death Magic alive. Or… I thought I was," Marikoth added the last slowly.

"I don't use Death Magic!" Finn cried quickly. "If that's--that's what you're thinking!"

"What do you think you were doing when you stole life from the Empire? Do you think your ability to drain life is *normal* for Fae? How deep in denial are you?" Marikoth asked casually with a grin threatening to break out across his face.

Finn felt a hole open in his stomach. Not only was he a half-blood Fae, which meant he wasn't fully part of the human race, but now Marikoth was telling him he

didn't fit in with the Fae either. It wasn't just his human blood that set him apart, but his magic that did so, too.

"I don't understand how I could be a Death Mage," Finn murmured.

"I know the *how*, but the *why* is curious to me," Marikoth answered. "Perhaps Fate is finally tired of waiting and will bring the doom it has threatened for so long."

"What Fate? What doom? What do you know about me?" Finn asked.

"Do you really want to know?" Marikoth asked.

Finn opened his mouth to say, "Of course!" But then he stopped himself. Did he want to know? Did he truly want to understand what connected him to a being like Marikoth? Because there had to be a connection if they both wielded this incredibly rare magic.

"No," Finn whispered. "It doesn't matter."

"Scuttling back into denial again, I see!" Marikoth laughed. "I understand all too well. I tried to deny what I was for so long. Longer than you've been alive. I finally accepted it, and the freedom I've found is… incredible."

Somehow from the look in his eyes, Finn did not think it had been incredibly *good*. Maybe incredibly bad was a better fit to that bleak expression that flitted across Marikoth's face.

"If this is a dream how do I wake up?" Finn asked, changing the subject.

Marikoth focused on him again. "You shouldn't wish to, because once you do you'll die."

"Rohan will find a way to help me!" Finn got out as he lowered his hands to his lap. It was exhausting just to keep them lifted up.

Rohan will help me. I know he's doing everything he can, Finn thought, but then his mind treacherously whispered, *But will it be enough? Will it be in time? If we truly are on the Fae side of the Wall, he'll be in danger himself!*

He looked up at Marikoth once more, convinced that these insidious thoughts were from the Fae and not his own. But there was no evidence that Marikoth knew what he was thinking or was adding to his desperate thoughts. In fact, the Fae made a "tcha" sound of disgust and shook his head.

"So certain of him, are you?" The Fae's lilting voice went dark. "When you know next to nothing about him? When he's a lord and you're… a nobody?"

"Rohan doesn't care about that!" Finn snapped, even knowing as he said it that his defensiveness would indicate that he feared otherwise. "I know his character."

"Every royal cares about it. Because if they didn't--if there wasn't a distinction between noble and peasant--then they would lose their power," Marikoth scoffed. "It's not like being noble means anything when you're human. You're not chosen for your wisdom or your magic or how good you look with a crown on your head. It's who your parents were and that means *nothing*. So they have to keep a tight line on who is let into the club"

A cruel smile curled Marikoth's lips. Finn winced. He knew Marikoth was right. It was why his stepfamily wasn't accepted by the nobles as one of their own. For as open-minded as Rohan seemed, he likely thought the same way on some level.

Had Finn been unconsciously telling himself a lie that Rohan would end up throwing convention out of the window and choose him over everything? A noble and a servant? Together? In front of everyone? Really?

He had suspected that he was starting to feel something more than he should have the other day. He had warned himself not to place any significance on anything that had occurred between him and Rohan. Yet he felt, deep in his bones, that Rohan was honorable and that he would do whatever it took to save Finn's life.

"Besides, you know *nothing* other than what you wish to believe. Your life is so pathetic that the least bit of kindness and respect makes you spin whole stories of noble lords who fall in love with servants because they are good and pure." Marikoth's tone was cutting as were his words.

"Perhaps you're right," Finn said evenly, as he swallowed his own fears about this, reminding himself that he knew nothing of Marikoth either. Why should he take what the Fae said as truth over his own experience? "But I know that Rohan is trying to help me nonetheless."

Marikoth's expression went slightly blank as if he hadn't expected Finn to behave so reasonably but to break down and sob and shout that he was wrong. Finn's life had taught him all too well that people could and would disappoint him.

"He will try to help you, but he will not be able to," Marikoth said finally and rose to his feet.

"Can *you* help me?" Finn asked.

"You shouldn't ask help from a Fae. Besides, you dying might be best. Yes, I think it is best. No matter how interesting you are."

Marikoth began to pace the interior of the cabin, but with every step he took the floor and walls disappeared. They were now just in the clearing in the Lupine Woods with the cabin stripped away. The trees looked like an artist's inked sketch. Sweetfire was not there chomping on grass, but Finn reminded himself that this was not real. Sweetfire was with him in the Empire. He was relieved at that.

"If you are so certain that Rohan will fail and--and that I am d-dying then why are you here?" Finn asked, stammering over his supposed fate.

"Because I'm *interested* in you. Didn't I say that? I'm sure I've said it several times," Marikoth answered with a graceful wave of his hand. "And there is the slenderest thread of *hope* that you could survive."

"What hope?" Finn asked.

Too quick. I shouldn't have asked that so quickly, Finn realized as he saw the satisfied smile on the Fae's face.

"Again with asking for my help! You really are tempting fate here!" The Fae wagged a finger at him. "Surely you are aware that the Fae give nothing for *free*. Especially not hope to a dying boy."

Finn frowned. He had always thought the claims of deals with Fae were overblown. Now, he wondered if he was wrong. He also wondered if the other part of Fae deals was true, which was that the only one to ever come out on top of them was the Fae.

"You were the one who wanted to know about me first," Finn said. "Shouldn't I be the one to set the deal? I'll tell you about myself if you help me."

Marikoth shrugged. "I do not want to know about you *that* badly, and, like I said, you dying might be altogether better. You're an unknown quantity, Finn, and I am in the midst of a plan that has been in the making for ages. I cannot have it disrupted by you."

"If you think I could disrupt your plan then I must be someone important, right? You scoffed at me being no one so… don't you want to know all about me just in case my--my death doesn't end my danger to you?" Finn grimaced as fresh pain bloomed in his side as if he had shifted. Or maybe someone had shifted him. Like Rohan.

Marikoth tapped his chin. "Why do I have a feeling you know little about yourself? After all if you knew anything of interest you wouldn't be so ignorant of Death Magic. And yet…"

As Marikoth paced, more the garments he had worn as Rohan disappeared and were replaced just as the cabin had been. Marikoth was now clad in shimmering green silk robes with silver embroidery of skulls threaded through with vines. There was an elaborate black leather belt with silver buckle that cinched the robes at his slender waist. The robes had a stiff collar that rose just below the level of his chin. A white, linen undershirt could be seen at his throat where the outer robes parted. His skin was nearly as pale as the shirt. His feet were surprisingly bare. It was an almost sensual thing to see bare feet when the rest of him was mostly covered in layers of fine cloth.

He's royal, I think, Finn realized as he studied the Fae. *His clothes are more like a king's. But the Fae king is Thalanil, and Marikoth is clearly not him. Yet there is something similar about them. At least the version of Thalanil I dreamed of… but why would I dream of the Fae king's true face? It's absurd!*

Marikoth's eyes slid to him and another of those thin smiles appeared. "Trying to figure out something about me? We're in a dream. Anything you're seeing is a lie."

"Well, I see how you would like me to see you," Finn pointed out.

Marikoth stopped mid-step and whirled towards him. "How is that?"

"You want me to think you're royalty," Finn answered evenly, not rising to the bait to answer sharply, arrogantly or churlishly. The years of dealing with his stepfather's temper had taught him well.

"And you think I'm not?" Those crimson eyes flared.

He's very touchy about this. Perhaps he lost his position? Finn wondered.

He said out loud, "Actually, I think you are."

Marikoth blinked. He hadn't been expecting that answer either.

"But something is wrong," Finn continued.

"Wrong?" Marikoth mocked, but his gaze had not left Finn.

"Yes, I believe… I believe you might have lost your title," Finn answered and his voice went dreamy. He had these epiphanies about people oftentimes. "You've lost something because, though you look and move well in those kingly vestments, there's a part of you that…"

"That what?" Marikoth's voice was soft, almost silky.

Finn knew this was a warning. His stepfather's voice became the equivalent of this when Finn was treading too near some painful truth. It was like touching a bear's claw that was inflamed from a bite and hot with infection.

"You shouldn't worry what I think," Finn stated.

If this is a dream, I have to wake up. How do I do that? Finn wondered again. *And how do I get Marikoth to tell me what he knows before that so I can save myself?*

"Why shouldn't I care what you think, Finn?" Marikoth asked.

"Because we're strangers." Finn shrugged helplessly.

"Strangers? True! We are at that. I notice that you didn't say because you're a peasant. A nobody." That evil smile was back. "At least we've gone beyond that."

"As much as the *distance* between nobility and peasantry is meant to keep the nobles in power, how a peasant feels about them does that as well," Finn snapped back.

He winced as he said this. He'd used more energy as he'd shifted. He felt something trickling down his side as his veins pulsed with poison. He saw the blackness that ran along his veins and arteries darkening. He swallowed.

"But you've never felt like a peasant, have you?" Marikoth countered.

"What are you talking about--"

"You've always felt *special*. *Different*."

"Everyone feels that way."

"But not everyone can drain life from the land," Marikoth hissed.

"No, I suppose not. You say that there are only the two of us who can."

And then the answer to that mystery popped into Finn's head. It was so simple. It was so obvious, but it was also absurd. It couldn't be true! He didn't want it to be true, but parents passed down their abilities to their children.

And his father was a Fae…

Marikoth was a Fae.

Marikoth claimed they had the same magic.

That they were the only two who did.

Could Marikoth be his father?

No, no, no! It cannot be. Yet this thought had Finn's tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth. *Mother would never have loved anyone like Marikoth*. *There is nothing soft or warm or loving about him. He's cold and broken and… no, he can't be my father. He can't!*

Perhaps if Marikoth were his father it would explain why his mother had not sought out his help. Perhaps instead of the great love affair that she had hinted at, Marikoth had tricked her into bedding him just like he'd pretended to be Rohan for Finn. Maybe she had never told Marikoth about being pregnant with his child because of this. Maybe she'd been tricked in the most intimate and terrible way and Finn was the result. Whatever he'd thought of his Fae father before, he had never contemplated it being someone like Marikoth…

He can't be my father! I refuse to believe this!

"Ah, I see you've come to the same conclusion as I have. We must be *family*," Marikoth's voice was right in his ear. Finn jerked his head to the side, and he was looking into Marikoth's red eyes.

"No, that's impossible! We are not related!" Finn shouted.

"It is ridiculous. And yet…"

"There's no yet!"

"Only my family produces Death Mages, Finn," Marikoth said with a sad smile, "so you have to be kin to me."

"NO!"

The world spun for a moment and Finn thought he would vomit. His side felt like it was on fire. He curled forward and rocked. Marikoth touched his shoulder. It was a brief touch, but a pulse of energy flowed between them. Cold sweat coated Finn's brow, but the world was no longer a spinning top.

Then Marikoth continued to speak, "Now the question is: are you my father's bastard? He hates humans, but love and hate are so intertwined that I wouldn't put it past him to dally with a human lover and abandon a baby." Marikoth shook his head as if dissatisfied with that explanation. "Or perhaps you are my precious baby brother's whelp? That's most likely impossible, because he would have killed you at the first signs of you being a Death Mage." Marikoth tilted his head to the side as he looked down upon Finn's with an almost vulpine look as he said softly, "Then, of course, you could be… *mine*."

"NO!"

"You fear that. That I could be your father?"

"You're *not* my father."

Finn swallowed hard and found he couldn't look away from Marikoth's red gaze. Could this be his father? He searched that beautiful face for *something*, some trace of his own features, or, better yet, some evidence of a person his mother could

have loved. He saw nothing, and he felt nothing but dread.

"I have taken my share of human lovers over the years," Marikoth mused. "You could be the result of a dalliance. Though… though I thought that impossible."

His voice had dipped down at the end, and, for a moment, there was something like sadness in his eyes, but it was gone so quickly that Finn doubted he'd actually seen it. Perhaps he had imagined it. For though he had always told himself he didn't care about his nameless, faceless Fae father, perhaps deep down he did.

"If I'm your--your brother or nephew or… *son*," Finn managed to get the last option out with great difficulty, "shouldn't you want to help me? Shouldn't you want to save me?"

"Oh, no, for you could be a rival," Marikoth murmured. "I told you that I can't let you get in way of my plans."

Finn swallowed, trying to get some blessed liquid in his dry as dust mouth, and lied, "Or I could be your student. Your helper. Your…friend."

Marikoth regarded him, unblinking, as he said those things. Silence, as heavy as a mountain, fell between them. The Fae's expression was completely unreadable. Finn wouldn't have said he didn't mean what he was saying exactly. If Marikoth really *were* family to him then maybe… just maybe they could come to understand one another.

Finally, Marikoth said, "I'm going to give you some very important advice. And I'll give it for free."

"What advice?"

"Family will *betray* you in a heartbeat. Remember that," Marikoth said and straightened. "You do not have anything to trade with me. So I think--"

In that moment, Finn arched backwards so hard and fast, he thought his spine would snap from it. His mouth opened and his eyes rolled back into his head. He saw nothing but blackness at first, but then he was staring into the face of a spider. A spider so large that he could see reflections in its eyes. He looked closely at those reflections, even as his stomach revolted at looking so closely into its eye cluster. He let out a cry of shock and horror. He saw Rohan with a sword in the spider's eyes.

Rohan was in terrible trouble! Possibly even worse than his own!

HONOR

The spider that slowly lowered itself from an overhanging branch to the clearing was twice Rohan's height and many times his width. As its eight legs--each as thick as a sapling and over ten feet long--stabbed into the ground, the brown-eyed woman screamed. The spider's body was a glossy black with a red deathshead on its abdomen, as if to proclaim to all the world that it was death personified.

Its fangs dripped a clear fluid that, when it made contact with the grass, it blackened and smoked. There was a *clicking* sound as those fangs moved in and out, and a thin hiss like steam from a kettle was released from its mouth. The spider's eyes--there were eight of them pressed together in the center of its head--reflected back Rohan and Lightbringer. He knew that it was angry because he was taking its prey. Or *attempting* to, in any event. Rohan guessed the creature thought that with him and Serxio there it just had two more creatures to feed upon.

"Cut my chains! Cut them!" The black-haired man shrieked. He had only one more ankle to be freed from the pillar. "Save me! You can't save all of us! Save me!"

"Don't leave us! Oh, by the gods, don't!" begged the woman who had been shaking so badly before.

The man who had already been on his knees just gibbered as he stared at the spider.

Serxio breathed, "Rohan, there's more than one."

Rohan let his eyes slide to the right and then the left. In the trees surrounding the clearing were at least a dozen spiders, far smaller than this one, more the size of a large dog. Their fangs *clacked* and dripped as well, but they were hanging back from the clearing as if respecting the big spider's right to feed first. Perhaps if there was anything left over, they would get their chance to suck the remaining juices from their corpses. Rohan wondered if they would stay out of the fight.

"Free me and leave the rest!" the black-haired man shouted. His eyes were wild. Sweat poured down his face. "You can't save everyone!"

Rohan knew that, but he couldn't simply leave these people to this terrible fate. He drew in a breath.

"You can't leave! Oh, by the gods, it will suck us dry!" Someone shouted.

"Is there life after this? Is there something beyond the Veil? Pray let it be so," another whispered.

The others simply let out incoherent wails. Some covered their heads with their arms, straining as far away from the spider as they could, but it was nowhere near far enough. The spider's hiss was becoming more a *bubbling* sound as if it were readying poison to inject them with that would turn their bones soggy and their flesh into pure liquid.

“Serxio, when I say to run, you run,” Rohan commanded under his breath.

“You’re not going to run with me though, are you?” Serxio asked.

“No, I am going to cut this man’s chains, and then the creature will be upon us,” Rohan guessed.

The spider regarded Lightbringer as if it *knew* this blade and, potentially and *hopefully*, feared what it could do. It was a royal Fae blade that had come down through his family through the ages. The power it emitted now made it feel to him as if it were an extension of himself.

“Give me your crossbow,” Serxio stated.

“Serxio, if I don’t survive this someone needs to try and get a healer--”

“A healer? If you need a healer, my mistress is one,” the black-haired man rushed out. “She didn’t want me sacrificed. She’ll help you for saving me!”

Rohan wondered if this were, in fact, true. The man was so eager to leave his fellows behind but it didn’t matter either way, because he wasn’t freeing the man due to anything he might give Rohan in return. But his offer would encourage Serxio to leave with him.

“On my honor!” the black-haired man cried.

“You have no honor, Thomas!” One of the women shouted.

“Don’t listen to them. They’re criminals. I was falsely accused by a rival of my mistress! That’s the only reason I’m here!” Thomas stared at Rohan as if he might imprint the truth of his words by a glance alone. He spared not a look for the one who accused him.

Again, Rohan was not certain what was the truth, but if there was even a chance that this man’s mistress was indeed a healer--and none were gainsaying that--then he was the exact person they needed to save Finn. He would have taken a chance on this man before, now he most definitely would.

“You heard the man, Serxio! No matter what happens here, you must get his mistress to tend to Finn,” Rohan stated, even as his eyes did not leave the spider.

The monstrous creature was starting to shift. It could spring at any moment. Rohan took out his crossbow. He would break Thomas’ chains while firing a bolt right into the center of the creature’s eye sack.

“I don’t want to leave you!” Serxio cried.

“I know, but it is what *I* want you to do. In fact, I am *ordering* you to do it,” Rohan commanded.

He hoped that Serxio understood that these were orders from his king.

“All right. I will do as you command,” Serxio said with huge reluctance.

“After this, I will tell Leonid and everyone of your bravery, Serxio, in wishing to stay,” Rohan told him with a rather wild laugh.

“I look forward to it, not just to be praised but to have you *there* to do the praising,” Serxio told him.

“Good man! Now… GO!”

Rohan roared the last as he brought down Lightbringer on the final chain that held Thomas to the pillar. It snapped with a visible spark, and both Thomas and Serxio ran at full speed back towards the village. The smaller spiders in the trees did not immediately surge towards them, but instead looked at the large one as if for instructions. There was a *clack, clack, clack* from the huge spider’s fangs and the others dashed off, scuttling over branches swinging on gray, sticky webs after Serxio and Thomas. Rohan hoped to the gods he had not sent them to their deaths as well, but he had enough to worry about on his own hands.

Rohan brought up the crossbow even as he maneuvered around the pillar to cut as many chains as he could before the spider leaped. Already, he saw its legs

flexing. Any moment now it would jump up into the air and come down on him if he let it.

The spider seemed completely unphased by the sight of the crossbow. Perhaps it had not been hunted in so long that it had forgotten any fear of humanoids. Like a pet, the Fae had fed it so maybe it simply didn't associate danger with soft-skinned creatures that walked on two legs. Perhaps, too, such a weapon appeared puny and insignificant to it. If he had aimed at its chitinous armored body then yes, it would have been right, but those soft and gushy eyes were a huge target.

The spider *leaped* twenty feet into the air. It was going to crash down on Rohan and spear him on one of its razor-sharp leg points. Rohan let loose three bolts in quick succession at the huge eye cluster before he dove forward and rolled out of the creature's landing path. There was a squealing sound that had his eardrums throbbing.

He leaped to his feet and whirled around just in time to see the huge spider wobbling from side to side. Two of the bolts had gone wide, but one had sunk almost all the way in to the end. Black and green fluid poured down the spider's head and hit the ground *sizzling*.

Rohan took advantage of its pain and shock to cut more of the chains from the sacrifices. The brown-haired woman was freed next. She staggered back from the pillar and tried to flee down the path within the spider's way.

"NO!" Rohan shouted. "Not that way! Over here! OVER HERE!"

But one of the spider's legs rose up and came down, spearing through her breast. Blood arced up and immediately stained her white robes red. Her mouth opened in a silent scream as her eyes became glassy with death. The other humans screamed and shuffled around the pillar as far away from her and the spider as possible. When the spider whirled around to face him again, the woman's body stayed fixed on the leg like she was meat on a skewer.

Rohan's eyes narrowed. Rage filled him. She had been so close to freedom but then death took her. The damned Fae had left all of these people to be food for this thing. He would not give it the satisfaction. It lunged forward. He sidestepped then rolled beneath its body. He dropped the crossbow in the process so he had two hands to swing Lightbringer. He slashed the sword through the air at the nearest leg. Lightbringer did not let him down. It sheared through the monster's chitinous armor like it was paper. The sword's runes *gleamed* white-hot as if it were made to kill creatures just like this.

More green-black blood poured from the beast and it staggered, nearly collapsing as it lost one of its eight legs. He dashed towards its back end so as not to get crushed, but he didn't lose an opportunity to stab at its undersides. Lightbringer bit through the spider's flesh like it was hot butter. That acidic blood gushed out. Some of it splashed his right gauntlet and ate holes through the leather. His flesh beneath was scalded. He gasped with the breath-stealing pain but didn't stop moving.

The creature was lurching about in its own acidic blood as Rohan cut through more of the links of chain that bound the three remaining humans to the pillar. The spider slammed into it and partially unearthed the base of the pillar like it was a rotten tooth. The humans did not race towards the path. Instead, they hid behind him. He didn't know if that was any safer. The corpse of the woman impaled on the spider's leg was smoking as the acidic blood splashed up over her limp corpse.

"Stay back as far as you can!" Rohan ordered the humans.

They did as he said, but there was nowhere for them to go unless they entered the web-filled forest itself. He had a feeling that even touching one of those webs

would cause them to become hopelessly entangled, and even Lightbringer would take too long to cut them free before the spider or its babies were upon them. Those babies still had not come back. Perhaps the Battle Mages were dealing with them. He could only hope.

As if the spider heard his thoughts, it staggered towards them and shot a web strand at him. Rohan dove to the side. The formerly kneeling man let out a wail as the web hit him directly in the center of his chest. Within an instant, the spider reeled the man in. Its fangs struck down on either shoulder. The man let out a gurgle, then went limp before the spider wound him in its web.

Rohan hardly had a chance to process what had happened to the man before the spider spat another web at him, then another and another. He dodged. He rolled. He leaped out of the way. The last web strand caught his calf. The spider made a sound that reminded him of dry, rustling laughter and began to reel him in towards those monstrous fangs.

Rohan flailed to grab hold of something--*anything*--but his fingers just ripped through dirt. The one remaining woman lunged for him and grabbed his right arm, but he was yanked from her grasp. If he used the sword on the webbing, it might get tangled and stuck in the sticky stuff and then he would truly be lost. There was only one way he could survive this. He was only five feet from the monster. He would wait for the last moment when those fangs came down and the creature's head was as close as possible to him.

Time seemed to slow. He was pulled those last, final feet. The spider's fangs *clacked* with hideous eagerness. Its head reared back to strike. He twisted to the side at the last moment so that the fangs would not spear him as they had the other man. At the same time, he lifted Lightbringer. The sword's blade was blazing as bright as the sun. The spider did not have time to stop its downward thrust and impaled itself on Lightbringer's blade.

The spider went utterly still. Everything seemed to go still. The forest itself seemed to hold its breath. And then… the spider fell. Lightbringer sliced through its head as the creature slid to the other side. Rohan rolled as fast and as far as he could out from under the falling spider. There was a wrenching sound. The pillar was completely unearthed as the spider crashed into it.

Then there was silence.

Rohan's heartbeat and breathing were the first things to pop back into being. He quickly shifted his body as the blood pool from the spider widened and made for his still trapped leg. With a burst of strength, he slashed Lightbringer through the webbing. As he had feared, it stuck for precarious moments as the smoking blood drew ever closer, but with a final wrench and two more hacks, he was freed and jumped to his feet.

His muscles quivered. Sweat coated every part of him. His right arm was burned by acid, but he was mostly intact and most certainly alive. Which could not be said of the humans he had tried to save. Rohan turned back towards the single woman who had survived the fight. She was not looking at him though. Instead, she was staring at the end of the path into the clearing.

There stood the three priestly Fae. Two of the Battle Mages were also there. One of them had Serxio in a set of chains. Serxio's mouth was also bound. His eyes showed both his gratefulness that Rohan was alive but also shame that he had been taken prisoner. Thomas stood beside the middle priestess, smirking.

The woman who he had saved said softly, "Thomas has no honor."

The urge to throw Lightbringer at Thomas burned within him, but revenge would leave him weaponless. He gritted his teeth. He had doubted his ability to

defeat two Battle Mages. Now there were *five* Fae, and he was shaking from exhaustion after killing the spider.

They cannot blame me for destroying that monster! They should be thanking me! Rohan thought.

Their eyes were not on him but on the dead spider. Their faces were pale. None looked triumphant or grateful, but instead *horrified* as if they couldn't believe the spider was dead. As if they were *upset* at what he had done.

Did they worship it? He wondered. *Have I killed a god of theirs?*

But that didn't quite fit their expressions either. Just then, the priestess--Thomas' mistress, he intuited, and the healer that Finn so desperately needed--lifted a hand towards Rohan. It was limned in golden magic.

In perfect Common, she said to him, "You *fool*. What have you done? You've condemned the entire village."

Rohan had only a second to open his mouth to object before a bolt of magic left her hand and struck his chest.

Then all was darkness.

CONNECTION

Cold sweat coated Finn's body even as he felt the warmth of Rohan's form. Finn's heart was practically beating out of his chest, but it started to slow as Rohan's started to slow. He'd been with Rohan throughout the fight. Somehow, he was experiencing what Rohan was experiencing. It was like their souls were linked. He could not hear Rohan's thoughts or speak to him though.

Not yet, a voice whispered in his mind.

But he could see what Rohan was seeing. The Lupine Woods and Marikoth were gone. Likely only for the moment, even though he was more desperate than ever to wake. Rohan needed him!

Rohan had been amazing. More than that. Rohan had done the impossible by slaying that monster by himself. Rohan had killed it! He had done it! Finn could not have been more proud.

But then… then the priestly Fae had come.

And Rohan was down.

Finn could almost taste the magic racing through Rohan's system on the tip of his tongue. There was something scratching at the back of his mind, telling him that he could free Rohan from this… if only he knew how.

Christopher was right! I should have looked for help to master my magic before! Now, I can't help him!

Rohan was lying prone on his back. His eyelids were just cracked open. That small opening allowed Finn to see what was happening. There were three people looming above Rohan; two female priestly Fae and a human male.

The female Fae to his right gave off more of an air of command than the other, though Finn couldn't have said why. She had skin the color of ebony and white hair which was shaved on the sides but long on the top. The long part was elaborately braided and fell past her shoulders.

The other Fae was pale as milk. Her hair was also shaved at the sides, but it was a blonde and her braid was not as long. The end of it barely brushed her chin. Perhaps it indicated her rank.

The human male was well-made with short, black hair and eyes. Finn felt Rohan's lips tremble. He would have writhed his lips back from his teeth, but the spell kept him mostly frozen.

Thomas betrayed Rohan! Rohan risked everything to save him, and he ran and got the Fae! Finn realized with a flash of anger.

The blonde Fae was the first one to speak. At first the liquid-sounding language was unfamiliar to him, but somehow Finn's brain translated it, "How did he kill Hex, Ryleth?! He's a *human*! No human could do it!"

"No Fae either. And yet, he has done it," Ryleth, the one with the white braid, answered coolly.

“What do we do, Ryleth? Hex is dead!” The blonde Fae’s anxiety rose. “Her younglings will not hunt the creatures in the forest for us. The village will be overrun in days!”

“I am well aware, Tela,” Ryleth said tightly. Her lips pressed together. “I was the one to make the original deal with Hex.”

Tela dropped her head. “I am sorry, Ryleth. I should not have spoken in that way to you. I am just afraid!”

Ryleth’s expression softened. “We all are, but we must keep our heads.”

“I did try and stop him by coming to get you, mistress,” the human male simpered. “But he was intent on destroying Hex.”

That’s not true! Finn cried.

It seemed like this male human could stoop ever lower. He felt Rohan struggling to speak. He wasn’t the only one. Finn heard a muffled voice coming from a person out of his vision.

“Bring the other Unmarked One here,” Ryleth directed and made a come hither gesture with her right hand.

Unmarked One? Finn thought. *What does that mean?*

He soon realized what it was. On Thomas’ left forearm was a tattoo that glowed red like a brand. Another human was hustled over into view. Finn recognized the foppish, young man that had been with Rohan when Finn had *actually* encountered him in the Lupine Woods. Memories fully cut through Marikoth’s magical amnesia upon him. His mind was suddenly clear. Not that it did him any real good. Rohan and his companion were trapped there while Finn was trapped in his mind. All of them might die, but while there was life there was hope, and Finn wasn’t giving up. Yet things were clearly dire.

There was a glowing bond over the companion’s mouth. With a snap of Ryleth’s fingers, it was removed.

“You traitor!” the man swore at Thomas. “You utter traitor, Thomas! We saved you!”

Thomas meekly said, “I serve my mistress.”

“Serve your--you were staked out to be killed!” Rohan’s companion snapped. “She must care for you very much if she allows that!”

Thomas tossed his black-haired head back and said archly, “I was *framed*!”

“Maybe you were, but you’ve shown yourself to be *scum*!” the foppish man snapped. “If you’ve caused harm to him, you will pay!’

“I had to warn her about your plans to kill our guardian!” Thomas answered in that simpering way that made Finn wish to throttle him. “All I did promise was to take you to a healer. I did. Here she is.”

“You liar! You bastard!” Rohan’s companion shouted. “We were looking for a healer! We saw you being led away like lambs to the slaughter, and we followed! We wanted to help you! He had to kill the spider to do that!”

A healer? Finn let that statement sink in. *A healer for me! Rohan and this man were seeking help for me when this happened! Now they are both captured by the Fae!*

“You wanted to help thieves, murderers and rapists?” Ryleth inquired with an arched brow in Common.

“W-what?” The foppish young man goggled. “No! We had no idea… but even if they are guilty of such crimes, feeding them to a giant spider is not civilized!”

Ryleth cracked a smile. “I see.”

Tela hissed, “A *human* talks about being civilized?! I will show him our justice--”

Ryleth put a hand on Tela's arm to keep her from rising.

"What is your name, human?" Ryleth asked him.

"Serxio," Rohan's companion answered.

"And who is your master or mistress? You bare no mark of what House you belong to," Ryleth stated.

"House I… I belong to no House! I belong to myself!" Serxio gasped out.

Slaves, Finn realized. *She sees a human, and she believes he must be a slave. So that's how the Fae view us.*

He all too readily remembered Marikoth's behavior towards him. Marikoth who believed that they were related. Marikoth who would see him die with no emotion, with no care, with nothing. Because Finn might get in the way of his *plans*, whatever those were. Finn was no better than a slave.

"I do not understand how a human could be Unmarked," Tela hissed in that strange liquid language. "Could they have been born in secret?"

"Even if humans could hide themselves from us and bear young, they could not survive out here," Ryleth answered in kind. "But there have been… disturbances by the Wall."

Tela's eyes widened. "You think--think they're from the human lands? But that would mean--"

Ryleth made a motion for her to cease speaking. "We will learn exactly where they come from and who they belong to."

Serxio's eyes were fixed upon Rohan. "What have you done to him? To my friend?"

Finn very much wanted to know that too. He was desperate to know. For while he could see out of Rohan's frozen, cracked eyelids, he could feel nothing of the other man's body or soul.

"He is alive. For now," Ryleth answered, and Finn's heart rose up into his throat. "But I doubt that will be for long."

"What?! He killed a spider, a monster, not one of your people!" Serxio cried.

Ryleth let out a dry laugh. "Actually, he has killed our people. Countless of them actually. If half the village survives, I would be grateful."

"What do you mean?" Serxio asked.

It's not his fault! Finn thought fiercely. *He was doing it for me! He was only there because of me!*

"You spoke of civilization earlier. We are… we *have been* civilized longer than humans have existed. But, in this time, we cannot simply house those that break our laws indefinitely," Ryleth explained. Her mouth flattened slightly as she spoke as if she was not satisfied with this. "Everyone must contribute to the whole. These humans committed crimes for which death is the punishment. Their deaths would have renewed our agreement with Hex." Here she grimaced as she tilted her head towards the dead spider. "And Hex, with her children, would have killed the predators of the forest rather than our people. Now… Hex is dead. Her children will seek revenge upon us. Even if we can fight them off, the other beings that will come now that Hex is gone will destroy us. So your friend's actions in *saving* these criminals has condemned who knows how many to death."

"That's not-- that's not what we intended!" Serxio paled. "I swear it! We--we saw people in danger and we acted."

"But you did so without full information," Ryleth answered dryly as she rose gracefully to her feet. "We must abandon the village and make our way to Aymar. We have no other choice."

Tela gasped. "To the summer palace?"

Does she mean one of King Thalanil's palaces? How will I get to Rohan and Serxio if he is taken there? Finn wondered and his heart clenched.

"Yes, Tela. We can no longer simply send messengers to the king," Ryleth said almost wearily. "He must see how out of balance things are here beyond his royal walls. He must be made to understand how dire things are."

"But will he even see us?" Tela looked at Ryleth uncertainly.

"He…" Ryleth stopped as she caught sight of something on the ground.

She leaned down and lifted it up. It was Rohan's sword. The Fae runes along its blade glittered like the embers of a banked fire now and did not glow as hotly as when Rohan had battled Hex. Ryleth's forehead furrowed. She brought the sword up to her face to study it. Her eyes widened. She shot a look at Serxio that was a mixture of shock and fury. She dropped the sword to the ground as if the hilt burned her. She quickly rubbed her palm on her thigh.

"*Vudine!*" Ryleth spat at Serxio. "You are thieves as well! I should have known that one could not kill Hex with any normal sword!"

Tela's eyes widened, and she nearly cowered from the blade. She repeated, "Vudine!"

The word did not translate for Finn, not that he knew how words were translating at all. They were speaking Common with Serxio now, but he had understood the Fae language before.

So maybe Vudine is a name and not a description.

"That's Lightbringer! And we are no thieves!" Serxio struggled in his bonds. "That is Rohan's sword! It has been in his family for generations!"

Ryleth stared at him as if she could not quite believe he would lie so ridiculously. "A *human* with Vudine? The Sword of the Sun? It is an ancient Fae blade of royal lineage. A line before the Ravenspars took the throne."

"And?" Serxio shrugged. "Just because he doesn't have pointed ears and red eyes, doesn't mean there isn't Fae blood in him!"

Finn was speechless at this. Could *Rohan* have Fae blood too? The possibilities of it opened up for a moment. Finn imagined telling Rohan that they shared a secret. They were both part Fae. He could admit this to Rohan without fear of rejection or disgust, because Rohan was part Fae too. And then Finn could confess the largest thing, he could tell Rohan that he had magic that could revive Rohan's estate! Rohan wouldn't need to marry to restore it. Finn could save it for him.

But that was a pipe dream if he could not save himself and Rohan.

"That's absurd!" Tela snarled, distracting Finn from his thoughts. "You claim royal blood for a *human*?"

"Royal *Fae* blood," Serxio corrected her. "Still want to kill him now?"

"You are lying!" Tela leaped to her feet. "Enough of this! I will end them both, Ryleth!"

She made to lunge towards Serxio, but Ryleth shouted, "Stop!"

Everyone froze. She was looking between Rohan, the sword and Hex. She murmured, "He wielded Vudine. The magic still courses through it. This Unmarked human may speak the truth."

"What--"

"It is not for us to decide the fate of one who wields the Sword of the Sun," Ryleth cut Tela off. "The two of them will come with us to Aymar. The king himself will have to sit in judgment on this."

FATE

Rohan was only finally able to move his limbs after being placed in a locked cage on the back of a cart just outside of the village. His neck, wrists and ankles were all bound with heavy chains that weighed his body down. But even if the chains had not been there, he wouldn't have been able to move much.

Serxio and the human woman he'd saved were also stuffed into the cart. Their cart was not the only one. There was a whole line of them filled to overflowing with Fae, not warriors, but normal citizens. They were preparing to flee to Thalanil's summer palace Aymar. If they got to the palace, if Thalanil realized who Rohan was, there would be *war*...

"Rohan!" Serxio cried.

Rohan's head snapped up. Serxio was directly opposite him. His companion's face was filled with worry. It was also covered in dirt and marred further by cuts and bruises. Serxio had fought to get free. Rohan felt a mixture of fondness and anger. Fondness for Serxio's loyalty to him, but anger that he could not have kept the foppish lord safe.

"Are you all right?" Serxio asked. "That's a stupid question! Of course you're not! You've been spelled or whatever!"

Rohan struggled to swallow and then answered him in a hoarse voice, "I'm all right, Serxio. Calm yourself."

"How can I be calm?! These bloodthirsty Fae want to murder both of us for killing their pet spider!" Serxio's voice spiraled up.

"We're still alive. That means there is hope," Rohan said.

He turned his attention to the other person in their cart. It was the woman who had survived the spider battle. She was silent and watching them carefully. She didn't appear afraid of them, but on high alert.

"How are you, miss?" Rohan asked.

"Emma. Just Emma," she answered. "I am alive, which as you said means there is hope. Though I have not felt hope in a very long time."

"How did you come to be here? Your accent is northern Rirean," Serxio asked.

She blinked at him in confusion. "Like all humans do, I made a deal. It did not go well for me."

"How could you have made a deal with the Fae? You're what? Thirty, if a day!" Serxio cried. "The Wall went up twenty years ago. You would have been ten years old or---what's wrong?"

Emma had let out a sob. She quickly covered her mouth even as her body was wracked with cries that she tried to silence. Rohan tried to touch her shoulder and comfort her, but the chains caught his reach short.

"What is it, Emma? What is wrong?" Rohan asked.

It took her some moments to calm herself enough to speak. She swiped at tears that ran down her cheeks.

"I--I knew t-time was different here than Rirea," she got out.

"How do you mean?" Serxio asked.

"It moves slower here. Much slower." She shuddered and covered her face with her hands again for a moment, before dropping them and continuing on, "We also stop aging. That's one of the benefits of… *service*."

"Time is slower and we don't age?" Serxio boggled.

"Serxio, let her speak," Rohan urged.

Serxio nodded, and his chains, which were not as substantial as Rohan's, jangled too.

"I just realized when you said how long it had been that the reason I'm here, the reason I made the deal, is *gone*," Emma's voice was soft. "My mother was already sick when I left. She couldn't have lasted 20 years…"

Rohan felt the bleakness rolling off of her in waves. She shook her head and let out a bitter laugh.

"My brother said not to do it!" She wiped freshly fallen tears off her cheeks. "He said that the Fae always come up on top of the deal! But I wouldn't listen, because I thought I knew better. He'll be an old man now. Maybe… maybe he's dead too."

"What was your deal?" Rohan asked.

"A cure for my mother's illness in exchange for service," she murmured. "But they didn't say I would be there when she was healed. She's likely already dead… well, that was my mistake for not asking specifically."

"That's--that's monstrous!" Serxio cried.

"I should have been more careful," Emma murmured, her eyes distant, clearly thinking of some other deal she could have made.

Rohan frowned. Her reaction was somehow *off*. Uncle Hugues had told him that the people who made the deals did not do so with clean hands. Though wanting a cure for her mother was honorable, maybe there was something more to it. And now, this reaction of focusing on the wording of the deal, as if she wanted to make *another,* instead of shying away from the idea as if it were a slithering snake was strange.

"If time is slower here, how much slower?" Serxio asked.

"It hasn't seemed that long. I can't…" Emma shook her head. "I can't tell you if it has been months or years. Everything is a blur."

Serxio focused on him and whispered, "How long will it be for us when we get home?"

Rohan held up a hand to stop him from speaking. Though Emma did not seem like she had any love for the Fae, he didn't trust her to know where they actually came from, though their ignorance about how time moved here likely showed they were from the other side of the Wall. But he understood Serxio's fears. While it had been only a few hours for them on *this* side of the Wall, how long had it been in Rirea?

We have to get out of here!

Rohan glanced around them. In the nearest cart he saw a Fae child who looked to be about 10-years-old in human terms, but was likely far older in Fae. She had on a green dress and pink scarf. She was sandwiched between two older female Fae, likely her mother and sister. Her crimson eyes tracked him. He smiled at her and lifted a chained hand in greeting. Her eyes grew wider, and she hid her face against her mother's arm, but then she peeked out and slightly smiled back. It was then that

her mother saw what was happening and gave him a deadly glare before blocking the girl's view of him with her shawl. Rohan sighed. He couldn't blame this Fae, after all he was part of the reason they were leaving their home.

He felt a tingling sensation from his right. It was Lightbringer. He didn't know how he knew. The sword had always been near his hand. Now it wasn't and he felt somehow naked without it. Lightbringer had been carefully wrapped in a cloth and strapped to Ryleth's mount. She was riding just a cart's length ahead. His fingers ached for the hilt. For a moment, he thought the hilt quivered. But then Ryleth reached back and lightly touched the sword. It stilled, if it had been moving at all.

Her mount was not a horse, but a creature he remembered from books. It was called a sicen, and had a dragon-shaped head with a saurian body. It stood eight feet tall from the bottom of its clawed forelegs to the tip of the tallest horns on either side of its head. Ryleth's mount was rolling its orange eyes and snuffling nervously. If such a beast like that was nervous about going into the woods at night then perhaps he and Serxio had gotten lucky just fighting Hex.

"Whoa, Jacona! Calm yourself," Ryleth said as she patted the sicen's red, scaly hide.

"Do you think it wise to move everyone at night, Ryleth?" Rohan boldly asked.

If they started towards the palace that would be one step away from Finn and one step towards death for him and Serxio. Ryleth's head lifted and those red, Fae eyes looked in on him. He had spoken in the Fae dialect he had heard her use. Her raised eyebrows showed him that she was surprised. He hoped she was impressed. Though he was not happy that Serxio had revealed him having ancient, royal Fae blood--because they might wonder if he had *human* royal blood as well, and Rirea was the nearest human kingdom--he realized that it might be a benefit. At least, the possibility of such blood had stopped her from killing him and Serxio outright.

"Ah, you have recovered quickly from the Harrowing Seal spell," she said, and nodded. "That would support your companion's claim of your Fae blood. Not that it will help you much with King Thalanil. It will likely cause him to execute you all the sooner."

"Why would that be?"

Her eyebrows lifted again, but her lips flattened. "You claim to have royal Fae blood, but you don't even know the history of your family?"

"I clearly don't know *this* history," he answered her evenly.

"Vudine," she said, using a wholly different name for Lightbringer, "was the sword of House Aetunal, House Ravenspar's ancient enemy. Though like all the bitterest enemies, they began as the best of friends. House Aeturnal and House Ravenspar used to rule together. But then… there was a breach, and all the Aeturnals disappeared or were killed or… who knows."

"That doesn't sound very good," Rohan agreed with her.

Ryleth actually chuckled. "So you're a mystery. An Unmarked human with Aeturnal blood. What is your name?"

Rohan considered how to answer her. If he told her his true name she might jump to the conclusion that Finn had not, which was that he was Rirea's king. But would she expect the Rirean king to be wandering in their woods any more than Finn had expected him to be in the forest in Rirea? He was certain she would know he was lying if he gave another name. Therefore, to have any chance of gaining her trust and convincing her to help Finn he needed to be honest.

"Rohan," he finally said.

"Well, that took you long enough. You choose not to lie, which is good," Ryleth said. "And unusual for a human."

“Then you’ll know that I am not lying when I tell you that we came to the village to find a healer. Not to hurt anyone,” Rohan said.

“But you have hurt people. Look around you.” Ryleth gestured to the line of villagers getting ready to set off into the dark. “The danger is so great that we cannot even wait for daylight to leave.”

“I think I merely sped up the inevitable and saved some human lives,” he countered.

“Really?” Ryleth’s voice was chilly, and her crimson eyes narrowed. “Two human lives is worth a whole village of Fae ones?”

“Your walls and sacrifices wouldn’t have lasted forever,” Rohan said, and there was a flicker in her eyes that told him she knew that too. “And in a village of this size, how many *criminals* could there possibly have been that required a death sentence?”

“More than you might think.” Her smile was fragile. Brittle.

“How many *human* criminals?” He pressed and she did not answer. “Because I’m guessing that you never chained any Fae to that pillar, no matter what they’ve done.” Her smile was utterly gone. “So how many humans have you staked out there? How many innocents?”

“You judge what you do not understand,” she answered him stiffly.

“I do understand, Ryleth. You’ve had to make hard choices,” Rohan said, feeling the weight of his own in regards to his starving people. “Perhaps humans are *more* palatable to sacrifice, but you know what you’re doing is wrong. You knew it was also unsustainable. You would always have had to leave this place. I just stopped you from slaughtering more humans in delaying that decision.”

She was silent for long moments. Her expression was neutral. Too neutral. He wondered again if he had just made a mess of things, if he had misread her.

She brought that up, “If you wanted to make friends with me so that I’ll argue your case with the king, are you sure this is the tact you wish to take?”

“I think you appreciate the truth. I think you struggled doing what you did,” Rohan said. “Which is why I’m asking you--*pleading* with you--to help one human.”

She tilted her head to the side. “One human?”

“Well, he has Fae blood, too, I think, if that counts,” Rohan stated. “He was accidentally shot with a bolt and is very ill. He’s not far from here. If we could but go get him--”

“Go get him? Not far from here? You are a prisoner! I am not going to help--”

“So you would leave a potential Unmarked human at large?” He used her term even though it galled him to do so.

“Do you want your friend caught?” She looked at him incredulously.

“No, but without your help, he’ll die,” Rohan said bitterly.

“Then I’m afraid he will die,” Ryleth said. “For I cannot leave these people or send one of our own to go get him.”

“The people could stay safe behind the walls! It will take less than an hour to get to him!” Rohan cried. Panic flooded him at the thought of leaving a dying Finn behind.

“The walls do not cover the whole village, Rohan. Spiders can climb trees and lower themselves behind walls with their webs,” she said. “We cannot wait a moment more.”

“He’s good! Innocent! He doesn’t deserve this fate!”

“Nor do most, Rohan,” Ryleth told him, and she dug her feet into the sicen’s sides and rode farther up the caravan.

Rohan felt his heart fall. He slammed his back against the cage in frustration. Finn was going to die. Serxio was going to die. Leonid was going to die. He, too, was going to die unless he found a way out of this, and that possibility looked increasingly bleak.

Where there's life, there's hope, he repeated to himself. *There's still hope.*

TAKE

Finn gasped as if emerging from deep water as he lost his connection with Rohan. His back arched once more, and he collapsed down in a heap. His body shook. Sweat poured down from his hairline and along the length of his spine. He drew in deep breath after deep breath. His eyes fluttered open.

He was back in the clearing in the Lupine Woods. Except, he knew he was not really here, he was simply trapped in some kind of magical dream. He heard a stirring to his right and turned his head. Marikoth was staring at him intently.

"You need to let me out of here," Finn pleaded.

"Why? What happened?" Marikoth asked.

"I saw… I saw Rohan. He's been captured," Finn got out between gasping breaths. "He killed a--a spider. A gigantic spider, but they're not grateful… they *should* be, but they aren't. Something is wrong there."

Marikoth's eyes widened fractionally. "Something *is* bad there. Things are out of balance, you see."

"Why do you sound happy about that? You're Fae. Those are your lands. Your home." Finn's breathing was still so ragged. The side where his wound was burned like fire, but he had to find the strength to get up and to get to Rohan.

Marikoth's red-eyed gaze became distant. "It *was* my home. It should have been my empire, but… I was sent away. Exiled. Father thought that was a *kindness*."

Finn was only half listening to Marikoth's musing. His vision was starting to tunnel. With cold terror washing over him, Finn realized he was a hair's breadth from death. He could almost *see* it.

In the blackness surrounding the center of his vision, there was movement. Great black birds--*ravens*--flapping their wings. Then he realized that the last part wasn't some hallucination--at least any more than the rest of this was--as a raven had fluttered down from the sky and was seated on a nearby branch. It tilted its head and regarded him out of black eyes.

"... you see it will all fail eventually. Life without death. Death without life. I used to care about balance, but now I just want to see it all *burn*," Marikoth finished.

Finn tried to focus on the Fae's face. Marikoth's words--and he had clearly missed some in the middle there--made no sense to Finn. Death? Life? How could one exist without the other? They couldn't.

"You're not long now." Marikoth leaned down and studied him.

Finn could see the strange raven over Marikoth's right shoulder. He should have been focused on the Fae--who was bird-like in his own right, and rather like a vulture--but he found himself staring at the raven.

The bird did not look *right*. It appeared to be made of old bones and ancient feathers, and there was a mist of sorts--black and glittering--that seemed to hold it all together. Its eyes occasionally glowed a white-hot blue and were still fixed upon him. It flapped its wings, and a single feather drifted down to the ground. Finn was able to track it. Where it landed, the already blighted land utterly *died*. The grass blackened and flaked away. The brown earth beneath became gray, even the moisture in it disappeared.

What is this? Finn wondered.

"You're not paying attention to me, little bird." Marikoth caught Finn's chin and forced Finn to look at him. "Are you glimpsing beyond the Veil? The Great Beyond? Well, why don't I help you get there a little easier."

"No," Finn cried weakly.

There was a rapaciousness in the Fae's eyes now. A *hunger*. It was almost obscene. Marikoth lightly placed a hand around Finn's throat.

"There's so little life left in you. If I take a *sip* you will just slide away into death. No more worries. No more concerns--"

"No!" Finn struggled, but it was like a kitten under a mountain lion's paw. "Please! I have to get back! I have to save Rohan!"

"Even if you did get back, little bird, and somehow managed to survive, even if you tracked Rohan down, you couldn't save him or anyone," Marikoth said with a toss of his head. "You are completely untrained in how to use your magic. What could you do against Battle Mages? Hmmmm? Nothing. Better to just go into death's sweet embrace now and give me a little taste of you."

My magic…

Finn took life from one place and fed it to another.

Finn took life…

His eyes went to the bird. It rustled its feathers again. Was it like Marikoth, a visitor from death? Or was it from his own mind reminding him of what he could do? But it didn't hold *life* either way. There was only one thing--one *person*--who he could take life from.

Marikoth...

For a moment, the Fae's eyes grew unfocused as if he heard Finn's call. The raven cocked its head to the side. Finn's right hand reached up, and he ran the back of it down Marikoth's cheek. The skin was smooth. Silky. Different from human skin. Not as rough. There was a faint crackling electricity from where he'd touched the Fae. And Finn felt a pulse of energy.

It worked… oh, gods, it worked. I can do this… I can take life from him into me and keep it.

Marikoth shook himself and his eyes narrowed. "What did you do, little bird?" His voice was rough and angry. "Did you try to take life from *me*?"

The Fae tipped his head back and let out a laugh that sounded more like a snarl.

Finn's mouth was so dry, but this time it wasn't altogether from blood loss but from thirst of another kind, from another source.

"I wouldn't have to take--to take that much to recover," Finn said. "I'm just asking for a chance--"

"A chance?!" Marikoth's eyes flared with anger.

"To save Rohan," Finn explained. "I won't h-hurt you. You can make sure I don't. I just need--"

"You *fool*! You think I'm going to give you life?! You think to drink from *me*?!" Marikoth fumed.

He's not going to let me do it willingly, Finn realized in no uncertain terms. *But I need what he has. I need just a little of what he has…*

Finn reached again to touch Marikoth's cheek. The Fae slapped it away and then he was on top of Finn. He straddled Finn's stomach and put both hands around Finn's throat. His lips writhed back from his very white teeth.

"You bad little bird! I'm going to *rip* the life right out of you!" Marikoth frothed. "I'm going to--"

Finn felt Marikoth try to pull his life force out. But like when Finn had reached the Wall, there was a hard stop. Marikoth went very still. Only some spittle dripped down his chin. Shock and confusion reigned in his red eyes.

"What is this?" Marikoth hissed. "Denying me, are you? Think you can keep me from your little flame? I'm going to *crack* you open and--"

The raven spread its wings out wide. That wingspan grew and grew until it blotted out the sky, the woods, everything. It cast a shadow over him and Marikoth. Not that the Fae saw it. He was still screaming about how he would drain Finn.

Where the bird's head should be was a bird's skull. The beak was huge, more like a scythe than a beak. Finn's hands left his sides where they were sprawled like useless things and flew up. He wrapped them around Marikoth's wrists. The Fae didn't notice at first. So lost in the rage he felt at someone even attempting to do to him what he had likely done to so many.

This is for Rohan. For Rohan…

Finn *took* life from Marikoth.

It was *easy*.

And that should have been *terrifying*. Some part of Finn was terrified and horrified and so many things. This Fae could be family to him! But Marikoth would have snuffed out his light with as much thought as extinguishing a candle in a room. He would have damned Rohan and Serxio to death too. Maybe family did betray their members. His stepfamily had done terrible things to him, too.

But he didn't have to take it anymore.

Good people didn't have to suffer.

He could put a stop to it.

Finn inhaled deeply, and the pain in his side was much less. Marikoth was wildly bucking, trying to wrench away, but Finn held him there with no effort. He took more. And somehow, he had Marikoth on his back and was straddling him this time.

"Let me go!" Marikoth hissed and spat. "Let me--"

"*No*," Finn breathed the word like frost on a window pane in the dead of winter.

His hands were now splayed out on Marikoth's chest. The Fae looked stunned and simply gazed up at him out of outraged red eyes. This scene was a sick parody of the one he'd experienced with Rohan just the other day. Simply thinking of Rohan had rage and fear thundering through him more.

Rohan was in danger. Rohan might *die*. And it was all because of Finn. Because he had foolishly stepped in front of Tyreon. To save a wolf, he had potentially damned the man he cared for and who knew how many others.

"You *will* help me," Finn ground out. "If you are my father or brother or uncle… you will help me. You owe me this."

"O-owe you?"

"If you're my family, you abandoned me. You should have helped me. You should have let me take just a little to save other lives, but you… you wouldn't because you're cruel," Finn said.

For the first time, Marikoth's eyes rolled like a frightened horse. But he quickly washed that expression away and laughed, "Little bird, you are no match for me. Especially in your condition."

He said this despite what was happening. What had happened. What would happen.

Marikoth tried to buck Finn off of him, as if Finn were a piece of debris that had blown his way. But Finn determined to stay right where he was. Marikoth's lips writhed back from his teeth for a moment, and he slammed his hands against Finn. Before Marikoth's strength had been unstoppable, but now… it was like nothing.

"You owe me," Finn found himself saying. These words were coming from deep within himself. "You should not have come here. To gloat. To take. That was a mistake."

"I'm going to drain you dry! I'm going to make you pay! I'll put your life in a little bauble that I'll wear around my neck until I get sick of it and then I'll crush it under my heel and--"

Finn took more life from Marikoth. The heady stream of Fae life force that flowed into his body was the most stunning experience of his life. The *pleasure* of it to simply… take.

And take.

And take.

And *take*.

Marikoth was shrieking. He was pounding his fists against Finn's chest. Finn hardly felt the blows. He was experiencing *bliss*. So much life. So much. And he wasn't letting it go. He wasn't sending it out. He was keeping it all for himself. All the aches and pains and exhaustion he'd felt were just simply gone. This was wonderful! This was glorious! He never wanted this to end. Finn forgot why he was doing this.

Taking was its own reward.

Utter desperation must have filled Marikoth then for he managed to roll to the side. Finn lost his grip on the Fae, but he was immediately up on his feet. He felt he could lift a mountain. There was no pain in his side. Not even a hint of it. He reached down and the wound was gone.

"I'm going to *kill* you, little bird! You're going to die today!" Marikoth screamed.

And then there was a *caw*! It was almost deafening. The bird was still there. A huge shadow, blotting out the light. Marikoth finally saw it--though how he had missed it before was a mystery in and of itself--and he staggered back from the hazy, monstrous thing.

"N-no," Marikoth whispered. "No, it can't be!"

Finn felt the cold the thing emanated. He should have been afraid. He should have been backing away from it, but Finn felt no such desire or need. He just stood there, head cocked to the side, inspecting Marikoth. He was certain he could get a hold of Marikoth again. And when he did… he would be the one draining him dry.

No… no, this isn't what I want. I don't want to--to kill…

And Marikoth wasn't fighting back or getting his revenge. He was standing there, gazing at the huge black presence with a look of rage and shock.

"You can't be here for *him*! You can't! He can't be the one! I am! I am! I paid for it!" Marikoth shouted.

The bird did nothing and that was worse than if it had. Marikoth snarled wordlessly. The Fae outstretched his left hand and bright blue light erupted from his fingers. There was a *crack!* And a ragged line appeared in the air. Marikoth touched

that line and he and it disappeared. Finn stood there, alone, in the false Lupine Woods.

"No…" Finn whispered, realizing that his actions had lost him the one person who could get him out of this place. "What have I done? Why did I… Rohan… I forgot all about Rohan and… oh, by the gods, what have I done?"

ON YOUR FEET

The caravan crawled over the white stone roads. They had only gone a few miles, and it had been hours. Already there had been three attacks by Hex's children. Rohan had been watching out the back of the cage, and he had seen a black shape hurtle itself out of the trees. The glowing mushrooms that lined the road provided only murky illumination, so the spider had looked like a piece of silky blackness that had detached itself from the greater darkness of the night.

A winding grey thread unfurled behind it like a birthday streamer. The black body landed on the shoulders of one of the villagers. He didn't even have time to scream before it yanked him up and into the trees silently. It happened so fast that Rohan wasn't sure it had actually occurred, let alone had a chance to call out a warning. A woman's scream that her husband was gone removed all doubt.

And that was just the first attack.

The Battle Mages had spread themselves out among the caravan, but there were nowhere near enough of them. They conjured shields over the most vulnerable of the villagers. Everyone tried to get beneath their protective umbrella, which caused the procession to bunch up and go slower than ever. The cage was its own protection for spiders dropping in, but Rohan kept a watchful eye on the trees and kept his body as far away from the bars as possible. Killing him would be the spider's ultimate revenge against their brood mother's slaughter at his hands.

His eyes kept going to Lightbringer on Ryleth's saddle. After the second attack, he had tried to convince her to let him out and wield it to protect the villagers.

"You must think I'm *mad* or deluded!" Ryleth had laughed and shook her head. "Let you out? Give you an ancient weapon? No."

"I won't leave Serxio," Rohan stated flatly. "So if you let me out, I'm not going anywhere."

"You should leave me," Serxio whispered.

"Humans are *not* so loyal as all that," Ryleth stated with a shake of her head.

"I *am* and many are. I don't know the type of people you've been dealing with, but not all humans are disloyal and bad," Rohan told her, gritting his teeth at this stereotype. "But forget believing in my good nature. The truth is that I cannot go anywhere and expect to live. If your Battle Mages don't cut me down, the spiders certainly will."

Ryleth actually seemed to consider this. "You are telling me that you won't be foolish. But people are all the time."

Rohan grimaced. "I did not mean to bring this fate down upon your people. I truly thought only to protect those I saw in danger. Let me do that now."

Ryleth's brow was furrowed. "You know… I almost believe you. But even if I was so inclined to let you out and give you back your weapon, I would surely be

judged as an imbecile or a human-lover. Either of which would cause me to lose my position or even my life."

She had then ridden a bit ahead, but he noted that she kept reaching back to adjust Lightbringer. It seemed to be moving towards him. She had to finally tighten the straps on it to keep it in place.

Serxio leaned towards him, drawing Rohan's attention from the sword to him, and whispered, "They're not going to make it to the next town let alone Aymar at this rate."

Rohan nodded. He had seen glittering eyes between the tree trunks. "I think the spiders are planning something. Perhaps some kind of ambush."

Serxio blinked. "Spiders can do that?"

"These spiders can," Rohan remarked.

Serxio shook his head in amazement. "What are we going to do? How are we going to get out of this? And Finn…"

Rohan looked down. He hadn't thought that Finn could survive the night. Finn could be dead now for all he knew, but he wouldn't let himself believe that. He had to have hope.

"You cut our chains before with your sword," Emma said quietly. She had been listening to their conversation but not speaking. "Do you think these chains could be cut the same way?"

She lifted up her wrists where the heavy manacles clanked.

"Yes, but getting my sword appears almost as possible as gnawing through these chains with our teeth," Rohan admitted.

"It may not be." Emma drew in a deep breath. "What you did for us was noticed by the humans. There are a few--not Thomas, of course--who would help us. Once we get to Tradavor, if I can speak to some of them, maybe one or more will steal the sword for us."

"Tradavor is the next village?" Rohan clarified.

Emma nodded. "We're not that far away from it. I heard Ryleth tell Tela we would stay there."

"Forgive me," Serxio said, "but our experience with humans here hasn't been terribly good. How do you know these people won't betray us?"

"Most humans hate the Fae. They were tricked into deals like I was…" Her lips flattened. "The benefit of which we'll never see. And Rohan was right that they were finding reasons to claim we were guilty in order to stake us out to appease Hex. Every human who has any sense knows now that their lives are already on the line. Better to die on your feet than on your knees."

"I don't think we have a choice, Serxio. We have to trust someone or we'll never get out of here," Rohan admitted.

His companion sighed and nodded. "I'm normally such a people person. I mustn't let one bad apple spoil the bunch."

"That's the spirit." Rohan smiled at him. He turned back to Emma. "How long have things been like this? With the forest and wildlife out of control?"

Emma frowned. "Obviously, I cannot tell you in your timeline, but it has gotten so much worse ever since the Wall went up."

"Is the Wall causing this?" Serxio asked.

"If it were, King Thalanil would just take it down," she said with a shrug.

"Doesn't he fear humanity rising up against him for what he did to the King and Queen of Rirea?" Serxio sounded scandalized.

She gave a sad, acidic smile. "Fae don't fear humans. They think they've figured us all out. And maybe they have, but even if they didn't think they could use

our corrupt natures against us, their Battle Mages would roll through Rirea like a summer thunderstorm. There would be nothing left."

Rohan felt a stab of something. Rage? Denial? Defensiveness? But hadn't he thought the same thing himself? Yet having it repeated to him by someone else struck home in a way his own private fears had not. Emma did not believe that he could protect the people of Rirea.

"You exaggerate!" Serxio cried. "I can tell you that the army of Rirea is stronger than you think."

Again, she gave him a sad, little smile. "Do they have the magic that can break a Shield Wall? Or nullify Chain Lightning? Or quench a Fire Wave? No? No. Humanity gave all that up for peace with the Fae."

"What is lost can be found," Rohan murmured as he thought of his uncle's studies.

We were fools to ever give up our best defenses! Did humanity overall make a bad deal with the Fae? It certainly seems so.

But Rohan pushed that to the side. "Then why does King Thalanil have the Wall up? It must cost him something to maintain it. And, if it is not to keep humanity out, what is the point?"

"I've only heard the vaguest rumors," Emma admitted. "Something about an ancient evil come back, but it can't get past the Wall. The Wall keeps us safe. Well, as safe as we can be with everything gone mad here."

Rohan frowned. An ancient evil was hardly descriptive, but what would a human slave in a far out village know of King Thalanil's plans? Yet part of him believed she was right now that the Wall was not to keep humanity at bay. Could it really be a coincidence that on one side of the Wall there was too much life while on the other there was not enough?

Emma was looking at the two of them curiously. "Where do you come from? Not here. I can tell that. So…" She leaned forward and asked as softly as she could, "You aren't from behind the Wall, are you?"

"It's best you don't know too much about us, Emma," Rohan said gently. "I wouldn't want them to hurt you to find out what we told you."

Emma leaned back. "They don't torture us, you know? Not like you're thinking. They can make you… *want* to help them. Turn yourself inside out to give them what they want. Violate every ethical line that you put up. And before you think they can't do that to you, remember that's the first step down the path they want you to take."

"Rohan isn't like--"

"It's all right, Serxio," Rohan interrupted his loyal companion's defense of him. "We all have weaknesses."

Emma smiled and gave him a faint smile. "Yes, we do. Not to say that you aren't a hero. You clearly are. I can see it. Everyone can see it. Even Ryleth. But they like to break people like you most of all."

"Why?" Serxio cried.

"Because if someone were too honorable to resist them, their whole view of being superior, of it being *right* to do this, would crumble," Emma answered.

"Why do they think that they're so superior anyways?" Serxio huffed. "The things that make them special aren't earned. It's all biology!"

"Yes, exactly, so they are *innately* superior," Emma answered.

"They have many gifts, but it's how they use them that should count. Not that they have them," Rohan disagreed.

"Said like a true hero." Emma shook her head sadly.

There was a shout from one of the Battle Mages. Rohan looked up the line of the caravan. They were near the front so he could see why they had stopped. The forest that had hemmed them in at every turn opened up into a large circular glade. At the far end of that glade Rohan caught sight of two huge, glowing mushrooms flanking a large gate. There were the same metal pillars and the magical walls that kept the forest at bay in Ryleth's village, but, unlike that one, this one incorporated the trees as part of the village itself. Dead trees with massive hollow trunks, similar to the one that he, Leonid and Serxio had found, had been transformed into homes all along the outside of the village.

Ryleth rode out on her sicen towards the gate. Over half a dozen Battle Mages were standing on either side of it, which Rohan sensed was far too many for a friendly welcoming. A man dressed in similar purple and gold robes to the ones that Ryleth and Tela wore stepped out of the gate and held a hand up. Ryleth pulled back on the reins of her sicen. Though Rohan could not see her face as her back was to him, he could tell from Ryleth's ramrod posture that she did not like how this was going either.

"Hail, Samron!" Ryleth called.

The Fae in the gate, evidently Samron, was a man who looked between 30 to 40 years of age in human terms, but who knew how many in Fae. He had long, plaited black hair, as long as Ryleth's with those same shaved sides. He moved with a preternatural grace. His robes hardly seemed to brush the ground. He inclined his head in greeting.

"We received your message, Ryleth. Did you not see ours in return?" Samron asked. His voice was melodious but cool.

"Uh oh, this isn't good," Serxio whispered. "I don't have to speak Fae to know that they do not want us here."

Rohan's gaze shot to the trees nearest them. He'd thought he heard spider legs *clacking* as they moved from branch to branch. There were low moans of fear from the people in the caravan. Rohan tensed. This was *not* good. Jacona moved restlessly underneath Ryleth. The sicen sensed the spiders too.

"We need to keep moving," Rohan said.

"We're going to stay in Tradavor and then continue on, remember?" Emma asked.

"I don't think so," Rohan said.

"I did get your response, Samron, but I did not think you understood the… the full weight of our predicament. We need shelter," Ryleth said. "Just for a short while."

Samron shook his head. "I told you why we cannot do that. All of us have made agreements with the forest, Ryleth. You broke yours."

"A *human* broke our agreement. Not one of the Blood," Ryleth answered.

"If you cannot control your *humans,* then the failure is still yours," Samron intoned.

"He is a stranger. He thought he was doing good," Ryleth said, which surprised Rohan that she would mention his intentions at all. Maybe she thought it would gain some sympathy with Samron.

"The forest and its creatures do not care for motivations. They care for only what is their due, Ryleth," Samron said.

There were more *clacks* and Rohan felt the forest was alive with movement. His gaze flickered all over the place. It was an ambush. He knew it! He banged on the cage nearby where Tela sat on her sicen tensely. Her head snapped towards him.

"Silence, human!" she hissed.

“Tela, this is a trap,” Rohan answered.

“What are you talking about?” Tela scoffed. “Samron is merely trying to make us beg. Like usual, he wants to promote himself.”

She looked back at Samron and Ryleth who were still trading barbs.

More movement. More clacking.

“Don’t you hear that? Don’t you see it? Spiders are *everywhere* around us,” Rohan said and gestured to the nearby forest.

“I have ears and eyes, human. Far better than yours. Our spells will hold them off until we get inside,” Tela scoffed.

“We’re not getting inside, Tela,” Rohan growled. “How do the other villages protect themselves from the creatures in the forests?”

Tela’s brow furrowed. “Why--”

“Do they have a deal with the spiders?” he asked intently.

“I--I… each village has a deal with something,” she answered.

“Even if their deal isn’t with the spiders, won’t those other creatures they *do* have a bargain with object to letting in people who broke a similar deal?” Rohan forced himself to speak calmly even as all the hair on the back of his neck was standing on end. They were in danger. It thumped in his head like a drum.

Alarm flashed in Tela’s face as she finally understood what was going on here. Her head snapped to Ryleth and Samron.

“Look at the amount of Battle Mages. Is that normal?” Rohan asked. “Notice that Samron is just a step from the gate. He can retreat immediately for when--”

“For what?” Tela breathed.

“For the attack,” Rohan said. “Warn Ryleth! Prepare everyone!”

“I--but they’re Fae! They’re Blood!” Tela cried. “They wouldn’t do this to us!”

“But they *are* doing it,” Rohan told her.

“I must protect my people, Ryleth,” Samron’s voice rose up as he lifted the staff he was carrying. The jewel at the end of his staff glowed a sulfurous red. “And in order to do that sacrifices must be made. NOW!”

The Battle Mages of Tradavor sent globes of fire, acid and ice towards Ryleth just as the spiders descended from all sides on the caravan.

THE FLAPPING OF WINGS

Finn stared at where Marikoth had disappeared. The ragged line of light was no longer there and the air there seemed the same as any bit of space in this dream. There didn't appear to be a way out for him.

He said this was a dream, Finn reminded himself. *There is no physical space here. There's only my mind.*

There was a flap of wings. Finn's head jerked towards the sound. The "raven" had become bird-sized once more and was sitting on the branch again, regarding him.

"Why is Marikoth scared and angry at you?" Finn asked. "I was the one who was..." He licked his lips nervously but forced himself to finish the sentence, "taking his life. But he fled more from you than me."

The raven tilted its head to the side and blinked those blue-white eyes at him.

"And why did he act like seeing you here was a--a betrayal of some sort?" Finn pressed.

The raven resisted his insistence.

"Yet another mystery among mysteries," Finn murmured. "Some part of me wonders if Marikoth were some kind of hideous part of this nightmare, too. But he isn't, because he gave me life I didn't have. I don't think I'm dying anymore."

The raven fluttered its wings, sticking its beak under its wing, cleaning the tattered feathers just like a real bird might.

"But there's a good chance that Rohan and Serxio *could* die if I don't get out of here," Finn continued talking to it. "You helped me before. Won't you help me again?"

The raven didn't even look at him.

Finn sighed and looked around him once more. With Marikoth gone, the clearing didn't look all that threatening. The trees were still forming an impenetrable barrier around the space. He'd walked the entire treeline twice and inspected it inch by inch, but there was no way through. If he concentrated he could bring a flicker of the cabin up or thought he heard Sweetfire neigh, but the moment he turned directly towards the flicker or sound there was nothing there. And nothing he imagined with the woods happened. The trunks remained packed tightly together with no hope of slipping between them or even climbing over them and threading his way through the branches. He realized, even as he entertained these thoughts yet again, that thinking of this as a *physical* place with *physical* obstacles was a mistake.

This was his mind.

"How did Marikoth make things happen?" He asked the raven as he started to pace. "This is *my* mind. My dream. So everything here must be under my control at

some level. So why won't a door open for me so I can walk out and wake up?"

The raven fluffed its feathers. Evidently, it still wasn't going to give him any answers.

"I should be able to control you too." Finn pointed at the bird. "Though why I should dream of a dead raven at all when… wait a minute…"

Just then a memory came to him of a time before his mother grew too sick to leave her bed. They had been in the Lupine Woods, playing hide and seek. The forest hadn't been so twisted back then. There had only been hints of what was to come.

Finn had been hiding while his mother had been seeking. He'd heard her voice in the distance counting down to zero from ten before she would start looking for him. He was fleet of foot and took off, giggling. There was a large tree that had fallen over ages ago and was hollow inside. He would hide there. It was one of his favorite spots to hide. She would pretend not to discover him for a while, but finally she would pounce upon him. That was the best part, being found by his mother.

He located the tree easily, his sense of the forest not letting him down, before dropping to his haunches and slipping inside. The smell of old wood and damp moss filled his nostrils. He grinned and waited for her.

And waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Finn's smile died. He crawled out of the hollow tree. The forest was strangely quiet. Almost as if it was waiting too.

"Mom?" he called out.

But there was no answering cry. Something twisted in his stomach. His mother had been getting tired so easily lately. Maybe she had stopped to sit down while looking for him? But why didn't she answer if that was the case? He hadn't gone that far and she knew this was likely where he'd have hid.

"Mom?!" he called louder this time.

His voice echoed back at him mockingly. He took a few tentative steps forward. He'd always felt at peace in the forest, not fear, but his mother did not let him go that far into the forest by himself. Now he felt completely alone. He opened his mouth to call out for her again but stopped himself. It suddenly felt unwise. Maybe the forest wasn't listening for his mother but listening for *him*.

There was a flapping overhead. Finn crouched down and covered his head, expecting an attack, but nothing came. There was a *caw!* His head shot up, and he saw a huge raven sitting on a branch above him. It *cawed* again and flapped its powerful wings.

Had it been dead like the bird above him now? Finn's memory was foggy on this. His childhood fear of something being wrong with his mother had not allowed him to remember the bird's state clearly. He had straightened up though and looked at the bird.

In his child's voice, he'd asked, "Have you seen my mom?"

He'd asked with a child's belief that animals could be communicated with. The raven had regarded him with its intelligent eyes and let out another *caw*! And in that *caw*, Finn thought he heard an answer. If he hadn't been a child, he might have thought himself mad. Like with the wolves, he believed he understood the bird.

Caw! Come! Caw! Follow!

Then the bird took flight. It looked over its wing at him as if to indicate he should follow. After a moment's hesitation, he ran after it. The raven flew beneath the tree tops at a relatively slow speed allowing Finn to keep up with it. He jumped

over fallen trees and avoided briar patches as the raven led him in a different direction than he'd last seen his mother. He started to fear that following this bird had been incredibly foolish, but then he saw her. His mother! She had collapsed on the forest floor. Her eyes were closed. Her skin was pallid. An unhealthy sheen of sweat covered her face. But she was there!

He'd gone to her and managed to wake her. Getting back to Tanglewood had been so hard, as she was so weak and had to sit down every ten feet. It was the last time they had gone into the woods together. She had taken to her bed that night and never gotten up again.

But she had asked him in half awe and half alarm, "Finn, how did you find me?"

"The bird, Mommie. The bird showed me where you were," he'd said.

"Bird? What--"

"It's there!" Finn's little hand had shot out towards the window where the bird sat on a branch right outside the glass."

His mother had squinted. "I don't see anything, darling."

"But it's right there, Mommie!" Finn had insisted, needing her to see the bird so badly for some reason.

After long moments, she'd said, "Of course, my Finn. I see it now."

But she hadn't been looking outside at the raven. She had been looking at *him*.

Now, Finn looked up at this bird made up of bone and feathers and strange energy. This was his mind. Perhaps his brain was trying to tug at him.

Follow the bird and you can wake up.

"Will you lead me to where I need to go this time as well?" Finn asked the raven. "Show me. Lead me out of here. I need to get to Rohan. Please."

The raven *cawed!* It flapped its massive dead wings and left the branch. It flew across the clearing where the cabin had once been to the massive wall of tree trunks. Finn followed after it, easily running now with no sense of tiredness or pain.

It's because I stole life from Marikoth.

He'd never taken life from a person before. He hadn't known he could. And now that he had, there was a metallic taste at the back of his throat like blood. He'd drained a *person's* life to restore his own. And part of him had *liked* it.

Just as the bird reached the massive line of trees, Finn worried that it would soar over the skeletal branches while he would be unable to advance, but there was a *crack!* And the trees opened up to reveal a path. Finn quickened his pace.

Yes! A way out!

The bird *cawed* as if in agreement.

The path went in a straight line all the way to the Wall. The green jade color was a relief after all the drab browns, grays and blacks of the Lupine Woods. The bird landed in front of the wall on the path. Its wings twitched, and it fussed with its feathers. Finn skidded to a stop a few feet from it.

Up close, it was very clear that the raven wasn't really a bird. It was a construct of some sort. The energy represented by the black, glittering mist that glowed at the center of the bird's dead body was what really was guiding him. Finn slowly approached it.

"What do I do next?" Finn asked.

The raven's head suddenly wrenched back. There was a horrible *snapping* sound as delicate bird bones were broken followed by an explosion of feathers as the raven disintegrated before his very eyes. Finn gasped and stepped back as that ball of black, glittering mist rose up from the wreckage and floated at eye height. Finn lifted his right arm up as if to block the ball from reaching his face, but the ball

stayed where it was. He lowered his arm and then, slowly, leaned towards it.

"What are you?" Finn whispered.

The ball did not answer, though Finn thought he heard ghostly harmonics in the very back of his mind. If that was language, he could not understand it. But maybe even if he could not understand it, it could understand him. It was from his own mind after all. Yet part of him thought that, like Marikoth, it wasn't. It was something else from the outside that had gotten in.

"Will you help me? I need to wake up," Finn repeated his earlier plea. "My friend is in danger, because of me. I have to fix this."

The ball said nothing, but it rotated in a slow circle. There were those faint harmonics again. Finn licked his lips. He sensed the ball was listening to him, but he hadn't said the right thing for it to help him.

"Are you some Fae… magic? Some kind of supernatural being?" Finn asked.

No response.

Finn gritted his teeth. Anger and frustration had him saying, "Why am I surprised that if you are Fae that you say nothing? That you do nothing to help me? The one Fae I meet that might be family to me simply wants to see me die since I might get in his way! Damn you, if you won't help me!"

Finn thought he might have seen more sparks within the black ball during his speech, but nothing else. Another flare of anger lit within him.

"Why won't you help me? I demand that you help me! I command you to!"

And in that moment, Finn *pushed* at the ball with his mind. There was an electric *zing* that went through him. Then the ball moved. It moved so quickly it was almost a blur. It shot towards the section of Wall in front of him and shattered it. The sound of millions of shards of glass was deafening as they crashed to the ground. Finn backed away, putting his arms in front of his face to protect himself from the sharp pieces.

When the crashing sounds stopped, Finn became aware of a golden light ahead of him. He lowered his arms and opened his eyes. Beyond the Wall was not the Fae side of the woods, but a golden door. It was the door *out*. He was sure of it. Finn smiled and walked towards it. The light pierced him. He felt it in his soul. His eyes closed once more…

Finn flew upwards to a sitting position from a prone one. He drew in a gasping breath. He blinked as, instead of that golden glow, there were only the flickering flames of a fire.

"By the gods!" A voice cried. "Finn? Finn, are you--you all right?"

He recognized the person who was speaking, though he didn't know his name. It was the soldier-looking companion of Rohan's from earlier that day. The man looked nothing like the tough, disciplined soldier from before. His mouth was gaping open. His eyes were wide. He half reached for Finn while retreating from him at the same time.

Finn's eyes flickered all over the place. They were in a hollowed out tree, much bigger than the hiding space he'd been in when he'd been playing hide and seek with his mother, and was another connection to that day. Somehow it seemed like *fate*.

"You shouldn't move. You've been injured," the soldier was telling him.

Finn dropped his hand to his side. There were bandages there. He started to unwind them. The soldier leaped to his side, care outweighing fear. Finn knew then that this soldier was a good man. He was glad that Rohan had someone like him as a friend.

“No, no, you mustn’t do that! You’ll hurt yourself! Wha--what’s happening?” the soldier gasped the last question.

There were thick vines that covered the entrance to this huge hollowed-out tree, or Finn should have said there *had been* because as he watched they withered, became black and turned to dust. Finn’s side tingled for a moment and he knew that there was no wound there any longer. Between the life he’d taken--*stolen*--from Marikoth and the vines, he was completely healed. As if it had never happened.

How am I going to explain this to him? He’ll know I’m Fae. He might even try to hurt me, but he won’t be able to, Finn thought. *And I don’t want to hurt him so I must try and lie.*

“I don’t know. I have no idea what’s going on. I had such terrible dreams,” Finn stated, trying to appear frightened.

“I… I bet,” the soldier said, but there was a slight bit of distrust in his voice.

“My dreams were of Rohan and Serxio,” Finn told him as he tied the bandages--which looked to be knotted together napkins--tighter around his body. If the soldier saw he was *healed* he really wouldn’t trust Finn.

“Serxio?! How do you know his name? I did not think Rohan had introduced you,” Leonid said with a deep frown.

“Perhaps I heard it while I was sleeping,” Finn said, realizing his mistake. He’d known it because of seeing through Rohan’s eyes. He continued on, “I dreamed that they were caught by the Fae. I’m certain that they were.”

The soldier’s forehead furrowed, but then a slight spark of alarm appeared in his eyes. “They went looking for a healer in a village. But…”

“Then my dream must be true!” Finn said.

“Perhaps you overheard that in your sleep,” the soldier argued.

“No, no, there’s something about this place… I think what I dreamed was real. I know it was real!” Finn half lied as he struggled to his feet.

“You really mustn’t do that! Straining yourself is a bad idea!” the soldier cried, but seeing that Finn would not be kept down, offered him a shoulder to lean against.

“I feel all right. I mean… I feel I can stand and walk, especially if Rohan is in danger,” Finn said.

“He’s not in danger. He’s--”

“How long have he and Serxio been gone?” Finn asked.

A look of dread and fear filled the soldier’s clear-eyed gaze.

“Too long,” the soldier admitted.

“We need to go after them,” Finn stated adamantly.

“We do? With you and the hole in your side? And the deadly Fae everywhere? Who is this *we* you’re talking about?” the soldier asked.

Finn thought that it might be better to encourage the soldier to leave him behind for Finn’s own protection, even if Finn snuck out after he’d gone. But Finn was sure the soldier would die without him by his side. It was a certainty he’d had in the past, and he’d learned to follow those instincts.

“I think we’ve stayed in this place too long,” Finn kept his voice low and rushed as the sounds of animals creeping outside met both their ears. “I don’t believe it’s safe here.”

Finn wondered if his magic had attracted attention again. The dead vines were now a dead giveaway that something was wrong within this tree. The soldier looked at the now exposed entrance and gave a reluctant nod.

“But Rohan and Serxio will come here to look for us!” the soldier protested.

“We’ll leave them a note. That burnt stick will do for a writing instrument, and this bit of bark will be paper. We’ll tell them our plan.” Finn offered both

instruments to the soldier.

He waved them off. “My reading and writing is a little rusty. More time with the sword than the school books.”

Finn gave him an understanding smile. “That’s no difficulty. I can leave the note.”

The soldier relaxed slightly. “You’re quite clever. Rohan said you were.”

Finn flushed with pleasure. Rohan had talked about him to this good man!

“I wouldn’t have stepped between a bolt and a wolf if I were that clever,” Finn murmured.

“Aye, that’s probably true. But even the smart are stupid some of the time. Or more like foolish and kind-hearted to not want that beastie to get hurt.” The soldier grinned at him.

“What’s your name? I’m Finn, obviously.”

“Leonid,” the soldier said and looked as if he were about to say more but stopped himself. “Pleasure, Finn. Now, what is our plan that you’re going to write down there?”

At that moment, Finn heard the flapping of wings and a *caw!* from outside. Leonid did not react to it at all. Considering it was so loud and jarring a sound, and the soldier was on high alert, Finn realized that Leonid--like his mother--could not see the bird. But he could, and the raven would take them where they needed to go.

WHAT PRICE FREEDOM

Ryleth brought up a magical shield just as the balls of fire, acid and ice were about to strike her. A ball of acid splashed against her shield and slid down it to pool just a few inches from Jacona's feet. The sicen reared back, but Ryleth kept Jacona from bolting from behind the shield. Fire and ice balls met in mid-air, and a thick mist rose up as they countered one another. Ryleth used this cover to send a volley of fireballs of her own towards the traitorous Battle Mages. There were cries as some of those found a home in Fae flesh.

"Traitors!" Tela screamed.

But she didn't act. Their very betrayal seemed to freeze her to the spot with an open mouth and huge eyes. Rohan surged against the bars towards where she was. The movement stunned her, and she reached for the staff sheathed across her back.

"I'm not the enemy, Tela! And it's not just the Battle Mages either! Look!" Rohan pointed down the length of the caravan.

Spiders were leaping down from either side of the road and plucking up hapless villagers who were too near the edge of their Battle Mages' umbrella-like shields. Tela, again, looked too stunned to act.

"Tela! Get me my sword!" Rohan roared. "Let me out to protect you!"

He could feel Lightbringer straining towards him from Ryleth's saddle. She had sent a wave of earth towards Samron and the Tradavor Battle Mages. He was impressed at how she managed to stave them off. He had thought one against over a dozen was impossible, but Ryleth was more than holding her own. Samron had retreated through the gates.

"TELA!" Rohan shouted.

The apprentice shook herself. She drew out her staff and sent a flurry of lightning balls towards the gleeful spiders who picked up screaming Fae after screaming Fae and pulled them up into the trees and out of sight.

"Tela, I need my sword!" Rohan shouted.

"Slaves don't get swords. You'll live or die with us tonight," she said and wheeled herself around towards Ryleth, intent on reaching her mistress.

"Damn it!" Rohan slumped back, his chains rattled.

"They're insane! They need all the help they can get!" Serxio cried.

"She's right. They'd never give a human a weapon. They don't trust us. And considering what you can do with that sword, I understand where they're coming from," Emma said. "You could kill them all."

There was the faintest gleam in her eyes as if she *hoped* that he would have the opportunity to do just that.

"Rohan is a remarkable swordsman, but I don't think he could kill everyone himself. Not that he would want to do that!" Serxio said even as they all three leaned away from the bars of the cage.

“It’s more than that, Serxio. Something… has happened to Lightbringer and me. Since I came here it’s felt far more powerful,” Rohan muttered, even as he gritted his teeth together at every single scream.

Ryleth had managed to force Samron and the Tradavor Battle Mages completely back into the village.

“Close the gates! Leave the oath-breakers outside to their fate!” Samron commanded.

“Samron, you bastard!” Ryleth screamed. “You’re killing us!”

“I have to save *my* people, Ryleth. You and yours are the sacrifice I’m willing to make!” Samron shouted over the hiss of magic and the screams of people.

The last Battle Mage staggered into Tradavor, and the magical gate went up, trapping all of them outside. A few Battle Mages got up onto battlements and started to send more balls of fire, ice, acid and plasma at Ryleth. She wheeled Jacona around and raced back to the front of the caravan. Once she was out of range, Tradavor stopped the attack. Instead they just watched the slaughter from afar.

“Ryleth, give me Lightbringer!” Rohan shouted at the Fae priestess, but her focus was purely on her people and the spiders that dropped down like vile yo-yos.

Rohan’s gaze snapped back to the little Fae girl in the cart behind theirs. She was crying and clutching onto her mother. Her mother wielded a dagger. Her eyes scanned the air above them, but she missed the spider coming from her left. Rohan shouted a warning, but it was too late. The spider dug twin fangs into her spine. Her eyes rolled back into her head, and the dagger fell from her hand. She toppled forward. The Fae child screamed. She shook her mother, trying to wake her, but the Fae woman was either dead or paralyzed by the spider’s venom. There were black trails extending from the two puncture marks on her exposed neck.

The spider wasn’t done.

It crawled up into the cart. It was the size of a plump pig, and its front legs rose up as it regarded the little Fae girl. Rohan swore there was hunger in its eye cluster. He realized he was about to see this girl drained. She would die not ten feet from him, and he could do nothing.

“Oh, by the gods, no!” Serxio’s face was pale as wax.

Emma had shut her eyes tightly and put her hands over her ears. She was murmuring a prayer, perhaps to have the gods save them or just to block out what was happening, he didn’t know. Rohan found himself praying, but not in the usual way. The words came to him in a flood.

I am the heir of House Aeturnal. The day and the night are mine. I imbue metal, gem and stone with magic. These serve me so that I may serve my people!

Rohan stretched out his right hand. The chains that were so heavy felt like nothing. He felt the pull of Lightbringer. He *reached*. He felt a quiver in the air. He found himself repeating the prayer.

I am the heir of House Aeturnal. The day and the night are mine. I imbue metal, gem and stone with magic. These serve me so that I may serve my people!

There was a ringing sound. It was a clear, clean sound. Everyone who was fighting paused, even the spiders. Rohan’s gaze narrowed in on Lightbringer on Ryleth’s saddle. She was looking right at him the moment the sword broke free and streaked through the air to his hand. Her lips parted. Her eyes widened. There was hope and *fear* in her eyes.

Without thought, he brought the glowing blade down onto the metal chains. There were sparks, and the chains fell off of him and his companions. He sliced through the lock that kept the cage’s door shut, and he leaped to the cart with the little Fae girl. The spider saw him and let out a *hiss*. It knew him and that blade. He

was the one that killed its mother Hex!

The Fae runes all along Lightbringer were blindingly bright as he speared the spider's body and threw it out of the cart towards the trees. The Fae child stared up at him in amazement. She wasn't the only one. Every Fae stared. He did not know the figure he cut at that moment. Serxio would tell him later that he looked like a terrible king of old.

"To me!" he called in a language he did not even recognize.

But the spiders did.

They lifted up their front legs and clacked their fangs together before they abandoned the caravan and came swarming towards him. Rohan turned and leaped onto the top of the cage. He then jumped and rolled as he hit the ground. He felt filled with power, energy, agility and speed. He'd never known such power, not even on his best day. He was back on his feet and running. The spiders kept following.

He raced them into the clearing before Tradavor's gates. The Tradavor Battle Mages and Samron had no idea what to make of a lone human with a glowing sword racing out of the woods towards them with every single spider on his heels. They were too stunned to react as he skidded to a halt a few feet from their gate. He turned back to the approaching horde of spiders. There was a wild smile on his face. Rohan should have been facing his death, but he felt no fear. The spiders halted as well, not ten feet from him, confused at what he was about.

Rohan's eyes narrowed and glinted. He then spoke the prayer out loud, yet it was not a prayer, it was a *declaration* of war.

"I am the heir of House Aeturnal!" he shouted as he lofted Lightbringer above his head. "The day and the night are mine! I imbue metal, gem and stone with magic! These serve me so that I may serve my people!"

With every word, Lightbringer grew brighter and brighter and brighter until it was as bright as the sun. There were hisses and clacks from the spiders. He could not see them, but he knew they were trying to back away from the light--the deadly light--but they could not escape. The light from the blade rolled outwards like a wave, and the spiders were incinerated. They turned to ash in seconds. The light wave suffused the clearing and extended out into the woods. Rohan wasn't sure how long or how far it went. Finally, he blinked and could see again. The clearing was empty of spiders. Ryleth and Tela were at the head of the caravan, staring at him. He knew they'd seen the whole thing. Ryleth got off of Jacona and handed her reins to Tela.

"Ryleth, I should come with you!" Tela cried in a high-pitched voice.

But Ryleth shook her head. "No, stay where you are. We must… we must be careful."

Rohan wanted to tell her that she had nothing to fear from him so long as she let him and Serxio go to get Finn. But no words came. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. His arms trembled above him, and his legs quivered below him. Lightbringer was just barely glowing. Both he and the sword were drained.

Ryleth extended a hand towards him as if to calm a wild animal, "Rohan?"

She spoke in Common. Behind her, Serxio and Emma burst out of the road and tried to get to him. Tela brought up a hand to stop them but neither heeded her.

"Rohan, by the gods, what did you do? How did you do that?" Serxio cried in delight. "All the spiders are dead! Not just some of them! *All* of them!"

"Hush, fool!" Ryleth hissed at Serxio who frowned at her.

"What's wrong now? Rohan's not going to hurt you unless you attack him," Serxio told her and was about to walk past her when her right arm shot out and

grabbed him.

“Stop! Don’t you see? Can’t you feel it?” Ryleth asked Serxio.

“See? Feel? What are you…” Serxio abruptly stopped talking, and his eyes widened. “Rohan? R-Rohan? What’s wrong? Don’t you know it's me? Put down the sword.”

And Rohan wanted to. He needed to. His arms were killing him. But he couldn’t move. He felt incapable of it.

“His Fae blood… it has quickened,” Ryleth whispered. “The heir of House Aeturnal has returned to the Empire of the Eclipse Throne.”

Somehow her words reached him, unlocked him, and Rohan pitched forward. The embrace of unconsciousness catching him in its fast embrace.

LIFE OR DEATH?

Finn patted Sweetfire's neck. The mare tossed her head back and nickered. She clearly wasn't sure of this place, though it was clear she'd enjoyed some of the plant life. Tempest nosed his side, and Finn laughed.

"You want some patting, too, do you, Tempest? Well, how can I resist you? Especially with Rohan gone for now," Finn soothed the big warhorse.

"I don't know if we should bring the horses if we're trying to keep stealthy, though I am loath to leave them. But there's plenty of things here for them to eat while we're gone," Leonid said as he tied Serxio's horse to his own.

"We cannot leave them here!" Finn cried.

The thought of leaving Sweetfire and Tempest was inconceivable to him.

"I know. But horses are not ones to keep quiet. A whinny at the wrong moment…" Leonid let the sentence hang.

Finn knew what he meant, but he felt certain that they would need the horses for speed. Serxio and Rohan were already far ahead of them. He said as much to Leonid.

"If they have been captured, then the faster we spring them the better. Besides," Finn looked back at the giant hollow tree where the vines had blackened and shriveled from his magic, "we're not coming back here."

"No, odd thing that happened with those vines. What do you suppose caused it?" Leonid was studying Finn from under his brows.

"I really don't know." Finn ducked his head so as not to meet Leonid's gaze. "But it's all the more reason not to stay here."

It was clear that the soldier did not believe Finn's story that he had no idea what had happened to the vegetation. After all, the vines had *died* the moment he had woken up. Keeping up the ruse that he was still injured was also proving difficult. He was so eager to get to Rohan that he forgot to move slowly and carefully.

Finn tied Tempest's reins to Sweetfire's saddle. While he was certain that Tempest normally followed no one and liked to be out front, the warhorse would have to come second this night. He smoothed a hand over Tempest's forehead.

"All right. We left the note where Rohan and Serxio will find it if they return here," Finn said, though he knew that they would not come back. "Since we're taking the horses they will easily be able to follow our tracks."

"As we're following theirs," Leonid said with a huff of laughter. His eyes narrowed slightly. "We're taking an awful lot of risks for a *dream*, Finn."

"I know, but haven't you ever sensed something you knew was true down to your bones?" Finn asked.

Leonid cocked his head to the side as he thought about that. "Yes, there were times when I was new to being a Guard and was patrolling the darkest corners of

Dawnmore, and I would *sense*--no, I would *know*--when I was about to be ambushed. Saved my hide and that of my fellow Guards a time or two."

"Then you understand," Finn said with a small smile.

There was a fluttering of wings. Finn's head snapped up to the tree branch where the dead bird sat and looked at him. It let out a *caw*!

"What? What is it?" Leonid frowned and looked to the branch that Finn was staring at, but, clearly, he saw nothing.

"N-nothing. I thought I heard something."

"I've thought I've been hearing something the whole time we've been here," Leonid chuckled.

Finn only managed a hesitant smile. The bird hopped off from the branch then, an anxious hop. It was time to go. Finn began to lift himself into Sweetfire's saddle.

"Hey!" Leonid grabbed his shoulder, causing Finn to almost jump out of his skin, but when he saw Leonid's face the soldier's expression was gentle. "Let me help you up. We don't want you to start bleeding again."

"But I'm too heavy for--"

"Nonsense! You look as light as a feather," Leonid argued. "But it wouldn't matter if you were heavy as an anvil. Rohan left me to look after you, and that's what I intend to do."

Finn flushed. He hated lying to Rohan's friend, but he had to. Revealing he was completely healed would just raise more questions--and suspicions--which would get in the way of saving Rohan.

"Yes, you're right." So Finn just stood there, allowing himself to be lifted up gently and lightly on top of Sweetfire who easily accepted his weight.

"Was that all right? Did I pull at the wound?" Leonid asked as he stared at Finn's torn shirt, looking for fresh blood.

Finn pressed a hand against his side and pretended to move stiffly. "I'm all right." The raven *cawed*! "We need to be on our way."

"Right. I'm not a tracker--"

"I am. I know where to go," Finn said quickly. "Follow me."

The raven barely allowed Leonid to get in his saddle before flying off. They had to go at a fast clip to keep up with it. The raven kept them mostly on winding paths between the large trees. Vines wound around those trunks, and Finn thought he saw them unfurling as if to reach out and trip the horses or wrap themselves around unwary waists or necks. He could fully imagine being yanked off Sweetfire by a vine and lifted high up into the tree branches where he would be cocooned in gigantic leaves. But every time he looked at those shifting vines, they shrank back from him and went very still.

That's right. Stay away from me or what happened to your brethren will happen to you, Finn thought at them.

Whether they remained where they were because of his glare or simply because his overactive imagination had them moving in the first place, he did not care. Soon they left the claustrophobic paths and entered onto a white stone road lit by glowing mushrooms. Finn couldn't help himself from reaching out to brush their delicate frills. They were soft and left a fine powder on his fingers that luminesced just like the mushrooms themselves.

"Well, you got us on a road!" Leonid chuckled, sounding pleased, but then he saw the road was stone. "Oh, damn it to the hells! No tracks to follow now! Though… I admit I didn't see any before."

“They were faint. You have to know what you’re looking for,” Finn lied. He’d been following the raven, of course, not tracks at all.

“And you must have the eyes of a cat to see in the dark, though these mushrooms now give out quite a bit of light!” Leonid said as he too touched the mushroom’s frills.

Finn wasn’t quite sure how to answer these questions. It was clear that Leonid continued to not believe him yet was willing to go along. At least for now. Finn truly hated lying so he decided to say nothing at all.

“So which way? It seems to me we have a fifty-fifty chance of choosing--”

“It’s that way. To the right,” Finn said as he saw the raven soar down the middle of the white stone road.

Leonid blinked at him. “Ah--”

“That’s the way I think they went. Since it’s fifty-fifty, you don’t care which way we go, do you?” Finn tried to look innocent as if he were just trusting his gut and not the bird that was fast soaring out of sight.

“N-no, no, I’m good with your decision.”

Finn gave him a smile. “Good.”

The horses’ hoofbeats clip-clopped on the stones. With every step, the stones let out a little spark of white light. Finn was tense in his saddle. He knew that they were still far from Rohan. He couldn’t see through the noble lord’s eyes, even though he had closed his own and hoped the connection would be re-established, but there was no such luck. So he had no idea what was happening to Rohan at all. But the way his heart pounded in his chest along with the hoofbeats told him that things were likely dire. He dug his heels into Sweetfire’s flanks, and the horse went faster. Tempest let out a happy grunt as they flew down the road.

“Whoa, Finn! Slow down! We could miss a clue--”

“It’s this way!”

He knew it. He felt it. This was the way. He charged out into clearing in front of a village before he pulled back on the reins hard. Sweetfire danced to a stop. The village was beautiful with crystal clear streams and graceful homes. There was a fence around all of it made of delicate magical net, but the gate to the village had been left open, and there was no one inside and evidence that many had left.

This must be Ryleth’s village, Finn realized. *They are on their way to Aymar, and they took Serxio and Rohan with them.*

“Where are all the Fae?” Leonid asked.

He leaned forward on his saddle and peered through the open gates. There was a flutter of wings. The raven was hovering in the air by another path. The muddy tracks from the gates of the village led in that direction..

“Why would they abandon their village?” Leonid asked.

Finn saw another path that was not as “official”. This one, Finn knew, would lead to the pillar and Hex’s dead body. That was the answer, of course, but he could not tell Leonid.

“We should follow the tracks. Serxio and Rohan will be with those carts,” Finn said.

“How do you know?” Leonid asked, searching his face.

“It’s just… logical,” Finn said.

“Finn… look, I don’t know… oh, by the gods…” Leonid gasped.

The soldier was looking over his shoulder into the village. Finn heard something *creaking* behind him. He snapped his head back in the direction of the sound. His mouth fell open as he saw the creature *hulking* in the gateway.

It appeared to be made of wood and vines that slithered over its monstrous form. Its head reminded him of a horse's head if all the flesh were scraped off and the eyes removed and it was three times the size of a normal horse's skull. Its eyes were level with the top of the gates and glowed blue-white. They were fixed on Leonid and Finn.

"Found the larder empty, I think," Leonid murmured.

The soldier's eyes stayed glued to the monster while his right hand drifted to the crossbow attached to his saddle.

"What do you think a crossbow is going to do against that thing?" Finn grabbed Leonid's wrist to stop him from drawing the crossbow and drawing the monster's ire. "It's made of wood and vines! Your bolt will bounce or, if you're lucky, it will stick in an inch. It won't hurt the thing at all."

"I could hit it in the eyes," Leonid declared.

"In the eyes? From here?" Finn let out a shrill laugh.

"Don't laugh! It might think you're laughing at it!" Leonid warned.

Finn could feel the *life* radiating out from the monster. There was so much of it. Finn's mouth watered. When he swallowed though, he felt sick as he recognized that he was *hungry* for that life. He wanted it.

Marikoth said that Death Mages can use life to create great and terrible spells, stronger than anything Ryleth and Tela have. I could use this power to save Rohan and Serxio easily with this monster's life force, Finn thought. *Or am I just using that as an excuse because I want to drain this monster dry?*

"Finn, when I give you the word I want you to ride the hell out of here," Leonid whispered, still not taking his eyes off the monster. He reached over and started to untie Tempest's reins from Sweetfire's saddle.

Finn caught his wrist again, causing the monster to let out a low grunt and put its massive clawed hands on either side of the gate posts. There was a *creaking* and *groaning* that Finn recognized from the trees in the Lupine Woods. This creature was as if one of them had pulled its roots out of the ground and started to walk.

"What are *you* going to do, Leonid, when I'm riding away?" Finn asked.

If I use my magic, I can stop this thing, Finn thought with a kind of desperation curdling in his chest like spoiled milk in the sun. *But if I do, Leonid will know what I am. Half-Fae. A freak. Dangerous. Like Marikoth.*

"One of us has to stay behind to keep it busy. If we both ride away, it'll just chase us and, it's got pretty long legs." Leonid flashed him a bloodless smile. The light from the mushrooms caused his teeth to glow sickly.

"So you propose to commit suicide while I run away?" Finn's voice was tight.

My magic… it could stop this thing… Finn thought and flexed his hands as he remembered the rush of Marikoth's life flowing inside of him. *I don't want to hurt anyone! But this creature is going to hurt us!*

"I'm not arguing with you, Finn. This beastie isn't going to just stand there for much longer, and I *promised* Rohan I'd keep you safe. This way… you can get to him," Leonid said.

"No, Leonid!" Finn hissed. "I'm not leaving you behind! There's no way you survive this!"

Unless I stay and take this creature's life for my own, Finn's mind offered traitorously.

He felt the raven's eyes on him. It sat on the branch, unmoving. Waiting. Waiting to see what Finn would do.

Damn you! Finn thought at the bird. *Why did you lead us here? You knew this creature was present! Lumbering in after the Fae had fled!*

But the bird did not answer him.

"Finn, I'm so glad that Rohan met you," Leonid was saying, "You're brave, fierce and full of fire. He needs someone like that in his life. I only wish I could have gotten to know you better."

"Stop saying goodbye!" Finn pleaded.

There was a *groan*. With a frightening show of strength, the monster thrust the gate posts apart. The metal bent, and there was a *hissing* and *spitting* as the magical strands that made up the fence on either side winked out of existence. The creature lifted its horse head skull back and let out a sound like the blowing of a warhorn. Sweetfire danced under him. Tempest let out a snort and tugged on the loosened reins. Leonid fully unlooped them and let them drop so now he and Sweetfire were unencumbered.

"Go, Finn!" Leonid cried fiercely. "GO!"

With that last "GO" he slapped Sweetfire's flank.

Sweetfire let out a startled whinny and took off towards the path.

Behind him, Finn heard Leonid let out a wild laugh as he said, "Now, let's see what you can do without an eye!"

There was a rumbling sound as if a tree was uprooting itself from the ground, and let another roar chilled Finn to his bones. Finn pulled back on the reins and wheeled Sweetfire around to face the village and the monster.

Leonid was aiming his crossbow at the creature's eyes at it charged towards him like a boulder down a mountain. Inexorable. Like Finn had theorized, the bolts bounced off and came nowhere near the glowing pits of eyes. The creature pulled back its right arm, preparing to swat Leonid off the back of his horse. Bones would snap. His head might break open like a ripe melon with the force of that blow.

"No! STOP!" Finn screamed as he and Sweetfire raced back towards the beast.

Like with his stepbrother Christopher in the kitchen, the monster was pushed back. Unlike his stepbrother who would have been thrown halfway across the room, but for catching himself, the monster only rocked back slightly before roaring again in confusion and rage.

Leonid had switched to his sword and was riding towards the creature with it raised. Due to the thing being stunned, Leonid was able to get a hit in. He managed to chop one of the vines loose. The creature let out a scream of rage as it swung wildly. Leonid ducked as the gigantic arm went whistling over his head. Finn knew that he would not be so lucky the next time.

Finn threw himself from Sweetfire's back. He landed and rolled, his natural grace asserting itself. He didn't hide how much more athletic he was than normal humans in this moment. It was a jarring landing all the same, but he shook it off.

"Finn, no!" Leonid cried as he realized Finn had returned and was facing off against the monster.

The creature was fifteen feet from Finn. He had no weapons, not even his little knife.

I am the weapon, Finn thought.

He held his hands up, fingers twitching, even as he started to circle the thing. Its life radiated out to him in welcoming waves. His whole body felt bathed with it. He imagined being able to dive into all of its life and swim in it. The creature let out a rumble, and he saw that it was preparing to charge him.

"No! No! You bastard! You come at me!" Leonid screamed. "Come at me!"

But the monster was as fixed on Finn as Finn was fixed on it. His mouth again filled with saliva as though he were staring at that steak Marikoth had shown him in the dream. Time seemed to slow down as Finn regarded the creature with hooded

eyes. For a moment, he saw hundreds--perhaps *thousands*--of filaments of light coming out of the creature. He reached forward and brushed them. They changed from blue-white to gold at his touch. The creature stiffened as if it felt him. When he took his hand away, it took a few moments for the blue-white color to reassert itself.

"Finn, for gods' sake, run!" Leonid begged.

"Stay away, Leonid," Finn ordered, though his voice sounded very distant to his ears. "I'm in control."

"You're what?" Leonid let out a disbelieving laugh. "You're going to get killed!"

"No," Finn whispered.

The question is if anyone needs to die tonight, Finn thought.

He brought his hand up again and threaded his fingers through the filaments of light--of *life*--and he observed the gold color run along their shafts towards the creature's body. When the gold light reached the end, the creature stilled. The anger, almost unthinking rage, in its eyes dimmed.

Can you hear me? Finn asked. He thought he could understand wolves and other creatures. Why not this one? *We mean you no harm. Please let us go on our way.*

Finn touched more of those tendrils so that more golden light transfused the creature. He didn't hear words back exactly, but more images instead. Images of a forest choking itself, of trees becoming sentient, restless beings instead of planting themselves in the earth and putting down deep roots. There was no room any longer to do this.

No room. Too much life. Out of balance, Finn realized.

"Finn… what are you doing? Are you talking to it?" Leonid asked.

"Just stay where you are, Leonid. Be very quiet," Finn ordered, his voice taking on an aspect of command and certainty.

The creature had turned towards Leonid when he'd spoken, growing agitated once more. But when Leonid quieted and Finn turned more of those blue-white tendrils gold, it settled again and focused on him once more.

I'm sorry, he said. *I wish I could help you.*

Another voice, one like his own, but not, whispered, *Drain its life. What are you waiting for? It is an unnatural thing that would kill you both in an instant.*

Finn grimaced. *I'm not going to do that if I don't have to.*

Do not be foolish. Give an enemy a chance and they will take it, the voice, like and not like his own, whispered.

I'd rather be foolish than cruel, he said.

Even if it is the life of a friend or your own… or Rohan's? The voice taunted.

I can do this, Finn insisted. *I can make it leave us alone.*

Finn refocused on the creature. It was no longer a monster to him, but something that had come into being in a world gone mad. He felt pity. Rirea was dying but so was this place. While life drained away in his home, here life was strangling itself to death.

Let us go. We will let you go. Be at peace, Finn sent the creature.

It let out a low moan of hunger, of the desire to destroy, to rampage. Finn brushed more of those filaments. The creature swayed as if it felt pleasure from his touch. Then, with another moan, it turned and crashed off into the forest. Finn breathed hard as if he had fought a battle. He was shaking.

You should have fed. Now you have wasted precious energy that could have been used to save Rohan, the voice that was and was not his own sounded churlish.

It also sounded like it was coming from the direction of the *bird*.

"Finn, by the gods! How did you--what did you--who cares?! You did it! I thought we were both goners there!" Leonid cried as he rode over to Finn.

Finn's arms dropped to his sides. He was shaking and exhausted. He wanted to curl into a ball and sleep. Leonid hopped down from his saddle.

"Hey there, hey there! I got you. Lean on me," Leonid said as he grabbed Finn and allowed him to use his strength to stay upright.

"We have to…" Finn breathed deeply as even speaking was exhausting, "we need to keep going. Rohan and Serxio need us."

"I won't ask you how you know, Finn. I'm sure you do," Leonid said gently. "But let's just rest a minute and then we'll be on our way."

"Y-yes. We have to get to them," Finn breathed.

And the raven, which had been silent during the battle, *cawed*!

THE HEIR OF HOUSE AETURNAL

Rohan drifted to the surface of consciousness. His eyelids cracked open and he could see the golden light of a fire and dark shapes moving between him and it. Low, whispered voices floated over to him as he came in and out of the darkness of sleep.

"... we let you in here!" Samron's voice sounded rough. "You can't ask us for more than that!"

"You had no choice!' Ryleth snapped back. "You saw what we all saw. The heir of House Aeturnal. You saw him wield Vudine. No one else but the heir could do that!"

There was a tense silence.

"How could a *human* be the heir?" Samron asked, sounding almost despairing.

"The gods have spoken. Who are we to gainsay them?" Ryleth asked and he imagined her shrugging. "For my part, all I care about is that he is *here* when we are in most need of him."

"And what will King Thalanil think of the heir's return?! You think he will thank you for saving him?" Samron's voice rose. "And he's been *here*. We've given him succor! He'll think we're traitors!"

"I wonder what King Thalanil would say about you leaving a whole village to die outside your gates?" Ryleth replied acidly. "You have not a leg to stand on, Samron. We will be on our way in the morning so long as he is recovered."

"Hex's children--"

"Are all dead. Or if they are not, they will not come here," she answered coldly. "The other creatures have run away, too. They know the heir has returned.'

With those words, Rohan submerged once again into the sea of unconsciousness. When he awoke the next time, someone was dabbing his brow with a cool cloth. He let out a moan. His mouth was so dry. He wished he could suck the water out of that cloth just to get a little moisture on his tongue.

"Rohan?" Serxio's voice was high and tight. "He's waking up, Emma!"

"Don't jostle him, Serxio," Emma cautioned. "We don't know what's wrong with him yet so we don't know what will hurt him."

"W-water," Rohan managed to whisper.

"Of course! Emma, could you pass me the water skin? Ah, thank you! Now, could you help me sit him up a bit. We don't want him to choke," Serxio said.

"You hold him up, and I'll feed him the water," Emma suggested.

There was a sloshing sound as they exchanged the water skin from hand to hand. Then the opening to the skin was placed against his lips. He opened them, and a mouthful of water was tipped in. He eagerly swallowed it. Emma was about to pull it away when he moaned and clamped his lips around it. She tipped it once more allowing him to have just a mouthful at a time. Finally, he had enough for the

moment and released his grip on it. She moved it away. It was only then that he was able to open his eyes.

The three of them were on a bed. Emma near the foot while Serxio was beside him. The bedding was soft and warm, cradling his body. The bed's frame was carved out of the dark wood of the hostile trees. Elaborate designs of vines and flowers were carved into it with little faces peeking out from behind lush leaves.

The room was round with a stone fireplace on the far wall with a lovely mirror in gold and silver. The floor and walls were wood. He remembered the trees in Tradavor village had been incorporated into their buildings. He intuited that they were in one of the homes that had been made out of a hollowed out tree. The whole aspect was homey, warm and safe, but he knew they were *not* safe. The people of Tradavor had locked their gates and left them at the mercy of the spiders.

Rohan reached for Lightbringer by his side. He had half expected it not to be there, that Ryleth had it on her person, but his hand closed around the hilt. The sword was neatly wrapped in a dark purple cloth and was by his side.

"Don't worry. Serxio wouldn't let them take it from you again," Emma told him.

She and Serxio had been silent as he had oriented himself. The truth was he still felt a mixture of strange and fuzzy. He wasn't sure exactly what had happened even though he remembered it quite clearly. He had used the power of Lightbringer to somehow destroy all of the spiders and then… then he had passed out.

"They wouldn't dare touch Lightbringer after what happened," Serxio said, downplaying his role. "They think that you're… ah, well, Rohan, they think…"

"That I'm some kind of Fae king returned or something like that?" Rohan's voice sounded very rough. "I overheard Ryleth and Samron talking earlier in here."

"Something quite like that." Serxio bobbed his head.

"What--what *did* you do? How did you do that? Are you this heir of House Aeturnal?" Emma asked with a touch of awe.

Rohan's mind showed him the flash of light--*no, of power*--that he had sent through Lightbringer to eliminate the spiders but no one and nothing else. He'd been controlling it. And while Lightbringer had helped him to direct the power, the actual source of the power was him.

"I have no idea," Rohan answered honestly. "The sword has always felt like it was mine from the first, but I've never been able to do that with it before."

"They are really excited about what you did. I mean, even Samron let us in after trying to kill us all because of what you did. They reminded me of ants when a child puts a stick in an anthill. They were zooming all about," Serxio explained.

"They let us in, because they were afraid of what would happen if they didn't. Though, I think, we would have been safe out there anyways," Emma added, "as nothing dangerous was left alive."

Rohan looked at his hands and then at the sword. The sword was wrapped so he couldn't see the blade, but he knew it wasn't glowing. His hands looked the same as they always had. No sign of any of the power that had run through him.

All that power should leave a mark, But there is none.

Serxio shifted out from beside him, plumping enough pillows so that Rohan could keep sitting upright easily. Emma offered him the water skin again. He drank the rest of the liquid.

"There's food and more drink if you're hungry," Serxio said and gestured to a side table where roast game and vegetables were set out. There looked to be hearty bread and butter as well. Rohan's stomach rumbled, but he wondered if it was wise to eat food offered by the Fae. It could be spelled or poisoned, even if they thought

him some king reborn.

Maybe especially if they do, Rohan thought as he recalled Samron's words about being found traitors by King Thalanil by harboring him. *Little do they know that they would be twice traitors for housing the alleged heir of House Aeturnal and the King of Rirea.*

Could he really be related to the former kings and queens of the Eclipse Throne as well? How ironic it would be if that were true. While Thalanil might want to claim Rirea as his, Rohan could counterclaim the Fae Empire as his own.

"It's okay to eat," Emma said with a guilty flicker of eyes to Serxio. "The food is good."

"We had some," Serxio admitted with a shrug.

"*Some*?" Emma gave Serxio a lifted eyebrow.

"Serxio eats when he's nervous." Rohan gave his companion a small smile. "I should be glad he left anything for me at all. Bring a plate here. I need my strength because we are going back to get Finn." There was a look between Emma and Serxio. "What?"

"Just that I don't think they want us to leave," Serxio said as he cut some meat for Rohan and put vegetables and a roll on a plate. "There might not be any chains on us anymore, but the door is locked, and there are two Battle Mages outside."

Rohan lifted up Lightbringer though he had to almost immediately put it down again as his strength was weak as a kitten's. "I have Lightbringer. I can handle two Battle Mages if they get in our way."

"Perhaps you can. But what about a dozen more downstairs? And there are countless more outside. So, unless you will do to them what you did to the spiders..." Emma let the sentence hang as she got him some more water. "You're not that kind of man."

Rohan gritted his teeth. "No, no, I'm not. But it is poor form to keep the person who saved one's life imprisoned."

"We pointed that out to them," Serxio stated with an airy wave. "Not even my considerable charms could budge them."

"Perhaps it was my translation." Emma smiled faintly. "It's hard to translate such charisma."

Serxio, his plumage quite stained, ripped and bloodied, still managed to look all the brilliant lord. Rohan wished they were back in his castle where Serxio would be clean and neat and telling a good story by the fire.

The two of them came over with the food and drink. Rohan tried to use the fork and knife to cut the meat, but his hands shook too badly. He grimaced and tried to grip them tighter to stop the trembling.

"Here, let me," Emma said, as she took the utensils from him and began to cut his food.

"Once I eat, my strength will come back," Rohan said more to himself than to them.

He thought of time passing and Finn running out of it. Leonid was with the young man, but he was no healer. And Finn desperately needed one.

Unless I am too late already…

But he would not allow himself to think that. He couldn't.

He took the fork back quickly from Emma. He nearly dropped it. He took a breath, adjusted his grip and stabbed a piece of meat. He shoveled the food into his mouth. He needed energy. He needed the strength to get back.

"Perhaps you can use this heir thing to your benefit, Rohan," Serxio said as he sank into a chair. He looked exhausted and scrubbed his face with his hands.

“How so?” Rohan asked between chews.

The meat was delicious and juicy with a perfectly crisp layer of skin. He devoured it, but his strength hardly seemed to be returning. It would take time, but time was not something that they had. The good food and drink just had him thinking of Finn’s suffering, and it was hard to swallow.

“Well, since it seems that they don’t want you to leave to get Finn, maybe they will bring Finn to you,” Serxio suggested.

Rohan stopped mid-lift of fork to mouth. “Serxio, that’s brilliant!”

“Well, yes, of course, because it is my idea and--hey! You shouldn’t get up!” Serxio himself leaped from his chair to come to Rohan’s side.

Rohan had put the plate aside and swung his legs off of the bed. It was only then that he realized he wasn’t wearing his armor. He was dressed only in a pair of dark blue leggings. But he didn’t care who saw him half undressed. He grabbed Lightbringer and attempted to stand… only for his legs to go out from under him. He managed not to fall flat on his face because he used Lightbringer as a crutch. Serxio grabbed his other arm. Emma scrambled over to him as well, and between her, Serxio and Lightbringer, he was back in bed.

“Damnit! Damnit to the Dark Plains!” Rohan hissed and pounded his thighs with his hands.

“You gave your all to save everyone, Rohan,” Serxio told him. “You need to rest.”

“Finn doesn’t have time--”

“I know. I will get Ryleth up here, and we will make her get Finn and Leonid,” Serxio promised. He patted Rohan’s shoulders. “But you have to sit still. Rest.”

Rohan gripped Lightbringer on his lap. “We cannot let them know how weak I am.”

“You’re not weak. Not even when you can’t get out of bed,” Serxio said. “You’re the strongest person I know. We’ll convince her. Trust me.”

Finally, Rohan nodded. “Get her now. They must not wait to go after Finn. We’ve lost too much time already.”

Serxio and Emma went over by the door. Serxio pounded on it loudly while Emma said in a Fae dialect that Ryleth was needed immediately. Serxio and Emma barely had time to come back to his side before there was the sound of the door’s lock clicking open, and Ryleth and Tela were in the doorway.

Ryleth looked immediately upon him with those cool, assessing, crimson eyes. Rohan did not drop his gaze from hers even as he felt her probing into his soul. Tela sent only a few flickering looks his way, but otherwise she kept her head bowed and said not a word. Ryleth gestured for her to shut the door. Once she had, Ryleth brought her hands together in front of her, fingertips touching, as she approached a few steps towards Rohan’s bedside. Emma and Serxio blocked her from coming nearer. She lifted an expressive eyebrow.

“I see you are conscious, Rohan,” Ryleth said in Common.

“And I see we are still prisoners even after saving you,” Rohan stated calmly, but he allowed an edge to creep into his voice.

He saw a momentary flicker of her eyes. “We are… keeping you safe. After the reception we received in this village, one would think you’d be grateful for the protection. You killed Hex after all.”

“And I killed her offspring while Samron would have let them suck you and your people dry right outside of his gates,” Rohan snorted and shook his head. “Samron isn’t the loyal type. He’s someone who runs on fear.”

“Yes, indeed. Hence, our protection.” Ryleth gestured around the room.

“I am not concerned about myself,” Rohan told her. “I explained to you that I was looking for a healer before--”

“Yes, for your friend,” she finished for him.

“And you told me that you couldn’t spare anyone to go help him,” Rohan reminded her.

“You wish me to revisit that decision?” she guessed.

“Yes,” Rohan stated. “He’s very ill and he needs a healer. You are a healer according to Thomas though he lied about other things. Did he lie about that?”

“No, he did not,” Ryleth answered with a faint smile. “You abhor liars, yet you are human. So strange.”

“You abhor murderers, yet you are Fae. You sacrifice humans to monsters, and you leave the vulnerable to die outside of your villages. So strange,” Rohan pointed out.

Silence fell except for the pop and crack of the fire. Finally, Ryleth inclined her head.

“Point taken,” she answered. “But I still do not see why I should help you.”

“He saved your lives!” Serxio cried.

“He put them in danger,” Ryleth countered.

“We’ve gone through this,” Rohan cut them both off. “It was only a matter of time before your village was overrun by whatever is ailing this land. Tradavor, too, will soon be undone. And Samron and his people will be running to Aymar on your heels.”

Again, there was silence.

Rohan continued, “You will help me not because I helped you here but because I will help you get to Aymar.”

Ryleth’s head lifted and her eyes widened. “We are already taking you there as our--”

“No,” Rohan stated, and the word seemed to echo in the room. His hand tightened on Lightbringer. Everyone saw the flash of rune letters through the cloth. “I am *not* your prisoner. I am the heir to House Aeturnal.”

“You do not even know what that means,” Ryleth whispered. “Or was that a lie?”

“It does not matter what I know, it’s what *you* know that matters. What everyone in these two villages know,” Rohan’s voice was firm despite the leaching of his strength into the sword. It was like a battery, he knew, that he could use later. How he knew this, he wasn’t sure. “You will do this because their belief in me will make you do it.”

Her red eyes studied his face. “You will accompany us and keep my people safe if I do this?”

“Yes,” Rohan promised.

“All the way to Aymar?” she asked.

“Yes, for we both know, you will not make it without my help.” Rohan stared at her hard and saw acknowledgement in her eyes.

“Tela!” Ryleth called to her apprentice, who had been standing surprisingly meekly by the fire. “You will go find Rohan’s friend. Do you know exactly where you left them, Rohan?”

“I do,” Serxio stated, stepping forward. “I can get you there from your village.”

“Serxio…” Rohan had intended simply to try and indicate on a map.

“It’s best if I go. It will save time and all that,” Serxio told him quickly. “Besides, I have to show Leonid that I’m damned useful.”

“He already knows that. I know that,” Rohan told him fondly.

“I’ll go too!” Emma cried.

“You will *not*!” Ryleth snapped. “You will do as your master tells you. He has loaned your services to me for now. But I see that this has gone to your head. You should report to him.”

“No! I want--”

“Go *now*, Emma, or I will tell your new friends here the truth of you,” Ryleth threatened.

Emma went white, and her head lowered even as her hands balled into fists at her sides.

“No! Emma’s with us!” Serxio blocked Emma’s path. “Rohan, don’t let them do this!”

“She’s not a slave any longer,” Rohan stated firmly.

“Oh, yes, she is. Her deal is not done,” Ryleth told him then with a mixture of contempt and pity added, “You should know human nature better than you do. Stay a moment longer, Emma, and they will know everything.”

Emma pushed past Serxio’s arm and ran from the room. The door slammed behind her.

“You’re monstrous!” Serxio cried.

“No, I am saving you from making a mistake,” Ryleth said. “You will come to thank me on this. She is not who you think she is.”

“And who is she? Someone who made a deal to save her mother from a disease?” Serxio shook his head.

Ryleth let out a sharp laugh. “Is *that* what she told you? And you believed it?”

Neither Rohan or Serxio said anything. Rohan had a feeling that Ryleth wasn’t lying.

With a triumphant look, Ryleth said, “Now, let Tela and Serxio go save your friends so that you will save my people.”

CATCHING UP

As Finn and Leonid followed the road that the caravan had traveled over, Finn slowly recovered some of his strength. He caught Leonid watching him carefully to make sure he didn't slip from the saddle. Right after Finn had confronted the creature and communicated with it or controlled it--he wasn't sure which--Leonid really had to lift him up on Sweetfire.

Finn kept going over what had happened. Instead of drawing energy as he had with Marikoth, he had *expended* magic with the creature. The exhaustion wasn't unfamiliar to him. It was what he had felt when he made Tanglewood bloom. He assumed that he would regain his strength in time again.

But if I'm going to use my magic again, I'll need more energy, Finn thought and his hands tightened on Sweetfire's reins. *Marikoth said that Death Mages get their power from draining nature, animals and… people. If we run across Fae who attack us will I have the strength or cruelty to drain them? If they are going to die anyways, does it matter how? Is it not better to use their deaths for something else?*

But he could not push down the squeamishness he felt, even though, logically, he could easily accept that a death should be used to its greatest purpose.

"Have you noticed that it's really quiet? Compared to before, I mean," Leonid said.

His voice broke the silence so effectively that Finn jerked in his saddle with surprise.

"Ah, yes, it is… quiet." Finn tentatively reached out with his magical senses to see if he could find out why.

It was not the breathless silence of a predator being nearby. It was the silence of… *emptiness*. Finn's senses confirmed that. Though he sensed the life of the vegetation all around them--much too much life here--there were no higher life forms anywhere nearby. The creatures, like the one they had faced in the last village, were not within his sphere of sensing.

"They're keeping away," Finn explained.

"How do you know that, Finn?" Leonid asked after a moment.

The terror of being found out flooded Finn again. Why could he not keep quiet? Was it not enough what he had shown Leonid with the creature? Though, really, he couldn't have revealed himself more than if he had drained the creature.

I'm so glad I didn't do that. It would have been wrong. One thing to kill enemies but another to destroy creatures that are confused and in pain.

"I… I can just tell," Finn said.

In truth, he didn't know how this worked. He'd just always been able to sense life in things. How he did it was a mystery.

"Because you're… you're able to do magic?" Leonid asked carefully.

Fear closed Finn's throat. He couldn't say anything at first. Could he reasonably lie and say no? Would Leonid even believe him? And would lying to Leonid be worse than telling the truth? Because either way Leonid would tell Rohan what he had seen and what he suspected. Would he rather be known as a liar or as a… what? A Fae. A half-blood Fae.

"You're afraid to say," Leonid said, and there was such an empathetic look on his face that Finn's throat closed again for different reasons. "Well, you don't have to say. I just want you to know that… that you shouldn't be afraid to use whatever gifts you have to save Rohan and Serxio. Both of them are… worthy of that. Rohan is… *special*. So, to put it bluntly, don't hold back with what you can do."

Finn frowned for a moment. There was something in the way that Leonid was speaking of Rohan that was reverential. It could have been because Leonid was in Rohan's employ, but it felt like more than that. Though Finn couldn't understand what more there could be.

"Wait!" Finn held up a hand as his keen hearing zeroed in on voices and footsteps coming from up ahead of them. "There are people ahead! Coming our way!"

"We have to get off the road!" Leonid grimaced.

But there were thick vines on either side of them, and the trees were too close together to get the horses off the road.

Don't hold back… Rohan is special…

Finn rode over to a larger opening into the forest that was filled with the predatory vines. The moment that he and Sweetfire were within striking distance had the vines beginning to stir. Finn drew in a sharp breath and focused on the vines that started to quest towards them. He felt the life in them pulsing, throbbing, seething. He reached out his right hand.

"What are you doing? Let me cut those with my sword," Leonid said, clearly alarmed with the movement of the vegetation.

"It's okay. This is better." Finn almost added, *I need this so I have strength against Rohan and Serxio's captors*. But he kept this last part to himself, adding instead, "And faster."

One of the vines struck out and wrapped around his right wrists. Finn grimaced as the vine immediately applied bone-crushing pressure. He grabbed hold of the life in the vine. The vine around his wrist felt the danger then. It tried to unwind and retreat, but Finn had its life.

And he took it.

The vines that were winding between the trees like writhing snakes all blackened and fell apart before a wind blew them away. Finn sat up straighter as life flooded him. He closed his eyes and relished the feeling. It was like there were bursting stars in his blood.

"By the gods," Leonid whispered. "Remind me not to make you angry."

Finn's eyelids flew open, and he felt ashamed. "Ah… we can hide here. We need to get in. They're coming."

There was an alarmed creaking from the trees as he and Leonid led all four horses through into a now dark and empty space between them. The trees wanted to get away from him, so there was more than enough room.

The glowing mushrooms' light did not have enough power to illuminate them, but it would allow them to see the people that were passing by. Both he and Leonid slipped off their horses so that they had maximum movement. Finn patted Sweetfire's nose. It was not too long before even Leonid could hear the footsteps and lowing of some kind of mount. Voices and words became clearer.

"Will the litter hold him? His wound is severe. He needs to be kept stable," a male voice that was familiar asked.

Leonid jerked up straighter and mouthed, "*Serxio*."

An exasperated female answered, "Yes, it will be fine." She then muttered, "If this Finn is alive."

Both he and Leonid stared at one another. They were talking about him! Serxio was with this woman! And the woman had to be Tela! Finn now recognized her voice from the dream. But how had Serxio changed from being the Fae's prisoner to having Tela help him?

"He is! He's got to be," Serxio answered.

"And what will the heir do if he is not? Use Vudine against us?" the woman's voice rose up.

The heir? Who are they talking about? Finn wondered.

"No, no, Rohan isn't like that! He's fair and just. We have to get to Finn, because Rohan will never forgive himself if something--if Finn dies," Serxio responded.

Finn made a move to come out of the trees, ready to yell that he was alive and well! But Leonid caught his arm and shook his head. He indicated with his hands that they should wait for Serxio and Tela to walk past them and then sneak up behind them. Just in case Tela was still an adversary. Finn nodded his agreement.

Finn's heart was lodged in his throat. Adrenaline surged inside of him. What would he do if Tela used magic against him and Leonid? Could he somehow absorb it before it harmed them? He didn't know. So the slightest show of aggression should be met with overwhelming force, which meant that Finn had to be prepared in advance to drain Tela into unconsciousness.

Don't hold back… Rohan is special…

Hands sweating, Finn closed his eyes and reached out towards those voices. He felt three lives. Serxio's was a bright flame that jumped about. There was a creature's life, which also had a rather flickering flame. And then there was Tela's. Hers was a slow and steady burn. An eternal flame. Finn allowed his senses to skim her life. She was millimeters from his grasp. He could take her life in less than a second, and she would have no chance to do anything in response.

The steady thump of the creature's footsteps were followed by the soft pad of Serxio and Tela's footsteps passed by them. Then they saw them. Sexio and Tela walked by first, followed by the creature who had both his and Leonid's eyes widening. As soon as they were past, he and Leonid left the forest and glided out silently into the road. Finn kept his senses near Tela's life.

Don't hold back… Rohan is special…

"Serxio!" Leonid called.

The two stopped in mid-sentence. The creature ran into Tela's back, but she twisted out of the way at the last moment. Her lips opened in an "O" of shock and her magic surged to her fingertips, ready to send flames, acid and plasma against them. Finn moved faster. He clamped down on her life. She gasped and staggered backwards. Her eyes bugged out of her head as her magic was extinguished.

Serxio had no idea what Finn was doing to Tela. He just stared at Leonid and Finn with shock, but then he let out a delighted laugh and ran towards Leonid.

"Leonid! Oh, by the gods, Leonid! We were coming to get you!" Serxio cried.

"And we were coming to get you!" Leonid exclaimed.

Serxio skidded to a halt a few feet from them. Leonid gave him a hug that lifted the smaller man off the ground. Serxio let out an "oomph" and then laughed.

"Down, down, man-beast," Serxio chuckled and patted Leonid's back.

Once set down, Serxio brushed himself off and then took a good look at Finn. “Finn! Finn, you’re--you’re alive! You look... all right!”

“He’s more than that,” Leonid grunted in amusement.

“I am quite well, Serxio. Thank you,” Finn said quietly, but his focus was mostly on Tela.

He felt her magic surge against his control, but that only caused him to want to drain her more. Finn swallowed the saliva that filled his mouth. She was on the ground, unable to get up, and looking at him with huge eyes. She *knew* what he could do, and it had robbed her of speech.

“Tela, we’ve found them! What’s wrong? Why are you on the ground looking like that?” Serxio’s confusion tinged his voice.

“He’s--he’s doing something… what is he? What is he?” Tela gasped out, and Finn found himself tightening his hold on her. She gasped and said, “No, no, no! I’m here to help you! Not--”

“What are you talking about, Tela? Finn is not doing anything!” Serxio cried.

That’s likely what it appeared like. There were no flashes of light or glowy hands or even Finn reaching for her. He was just standing, staring at her, and yet her life was in his hands.

“He is! Tell him to stop, Serxio! Tell him I’m on your side!” Tela begged.

“What? I--”

“Finn,” Leonid said softly.

“Is she our friend, Serxio?” Finn asked calmly.

“Y-yes, well… sort of!” Serxio hemmed and hawed.

“Serxio?!!” Tela wailed as Finn took just a *sip*.

It was like wine in the blood--rich and exciting--and he shuddered with his desire for it.

“Look, Rohan’s really not well. He used Lightbringer to kill like a million spiders and--”

“A million?” Leonid asked disbelievingly. “I suppose that explains the lack of creatures around here.”

“What do you mean not well?” Finn asked sharply at the same time.

“He used magic! He’s got ancient Fae blood of some king and… well, he did something spectacular,” Serxio said. “So he’s resting. Otherwise he would be here himself. But he made a deal that he’ll continue to help them with his sword if they would come get you. So… so maybe don’t hurt Tela?”

“If I release you, do you promise not to try and harm us, Tela?” Finn asked her.

She nodded vigorously. “I’m really your friend!”

He doubted that, but he released her. She let out a gasp as if she hadn’t been able to breathe freely when he was holding her.

“You really did have a hold on her, didn’t you?” Serxio sounded surprised but not frightened or horrified. “Well, I suppose it's the Fae blood you and Rohan both have. Magic! I wish I could use magic.”

Finn stiffened and fear flooded him. Serxio had just revealed something that Finn had tried so hard to conceal as if it was nothing. But he had also said that Rohan had *magic* and Fae blood.

“Serxio, let’s not go there, shall we?” Leonid gave Serxio a meaningful look that the other man didn’t seem to understand.

Tela had scrambled to her feet and was hiding behind the saurian creature. She barely blinked as she stared at him. Finn was not so keen on her either. He remembered quite well her desire to kill Rohan and Serxio earlier after the death of Hex.

“Where are they keeping Rohan?” Finn asked. “We must go there now.”

“Ah, it’s actually not that far away. A place called Tradavor,” Serxio said. “Just up the road. We’re going to go through where he just annihilated those spiders. I have to tell you all about it!”

“Let’s walk and talk,” Leonid said. “I’ll go get the horses.”

Tela and Finn stared at one another. And the raven, who had alighted on a nearby tree branch, let out a *caw!*

REUNITED

Sunlight had Rohan stirring from sleep. He was in that blissful moment before full consciousness returned and all the problems of waking life intruded. In fact, this feeling was intensified because he felt a light weight on his chest and warmth from another body resting along his side. There was the soft sound of breathing that wasn't his own.

For a moment, Rohan believed he was back in the dilapidated cabin, napping with Finn--that he hadn't shot Finn with a bolt--and that the young man was instead happy, safe and in his arms. This dream Finn stirred against him and tightened his arms around Rohan's chest. He could even smell this dream Finn in his nostrils. That clean, refreshing scent of the outdoors. Rohan's heart clenched, as this *dream* of Finn--for he *must* be dreaming--was so very real. What would he give to have this be real? Almost anything.

His eyelids fluttered open, and he stared up at the ceiling of the hollowed-out tree. He was in Tradavor, not the cabin, not even in Rirea, and yet that sweet weight and shifting body were *still* against his own. He looked down to see the top of Finn's head resting on his chest. At his movement, Finn looked up at him. Rohan was too stunned to speak.

"Rohan?" Finn's green eyes opened in wonder and happiness. A smile burst across his face. "He's awake! Leonid! Serxio! Rohan's awake!"

"Thank the gods!" Leonid's gruff rumble came from across the room. "Wake up, you lummox! Serxio, wake up!"

There was a soft thump, and Rohan imagined Leonid throwing a pillow at the young lord's head. With Finn still on top of him, he couldn't see what was happening there. Not that he cared. Having Finn against him--was Finn really here?--was something he would not give up.

"Huh?! What? Spiders? Not the spiders!" Serxio cried. "Oh, oh, dear… we're safe. No eight-legged things!"

"There are no spiders. Rohan killed them all, remember? You regaled us last night with that story for *hours*," Leonid reminded him.

Spiders? Hex… the sword… death by light!

Despite his earlier thought about not dislodging Finn, Rohan was rocketing upwards in bed to reach for his sword. He would defend them to the death against the spiders or anything else! A light but firm hand was on his shoulder. Finn was kneeling now beside him and pushing him back down.

"It's all right, Rohan," Finn told him. "We're not in danger."

Rohan stared at him stupidly for long moments before he cupped Finn's face with shaking hands. "F-Finn? You're… you're *here*? Or am I dreaming again? That would be too cruel."

A smile bloomed again on the lovely young man's face as a faint blush coated his cheeks. "No, Rohan. Like the first time we met, I can swear to you that I am not a dream."

Rohan kissed Finn fiercely until they had to part for air. Then he rested his forehead against Finn's and shook. Finn was alive! Alive!

"You're here. You're alive. Praise all the gods. I would never have forgiven myself if you had not recovered," Rohan murmured.

"I'm so sorry, Rohan. All of this is my fault." Finn murmured as he stroked Rohan's back. "If I hadn't stepped in front of Tyreon--"

"It is *not* your fault. None of this is your fault," Rohan assured him.

"You know the wolf's name, Finn? Or did Leonid tell you?" Serxio asked.

Finn was still a moment--considering whether to tell the truth or lie, Rohan realized--and then the young man nodded. "Leonid may have told me, but I already knew. I--I dreamed of him. He didn't mean us harm. That's why I didn't want you to shoot him."

"He's a bloody, big wolf, and he tried to drag you off to his lair to feast upon you, Finn, after you passed out," Leonid said. "So you missed that last, important part."

"I can't believe Tyreon meant to hurt me at all. He probably thought he was helping. Protecting me," Finn said.

"The King of Wolves would protect you, I think. Are you... well? You look *well*. Ryleth helped you as she promised?" Rohan asked.

His throat felt thick with emotion. To have Finn here and in his arms was more than he had hoped for. At best, he had expected the young man to still be comatose and clinging to life, but Finn seemed absolutely unharmed as if he had never been injured in the first place. There were mysteries around this young man. He still half suspected that Finn was some spirit of the forest.

Finn stiffened slightly, but then he said simply, "I am well. We're all well. But are you… you slept so deeply that nothing we did woke you."

"Not even Serxio's incessant chattering," Leonid said with a faint smile.

Serxio, looking affronted, stated, "You talked just as much! With all that description of the *single* creature you faced off against compared to the spider goddess and her evil brood that Rohan and I battled. You'd think one was the same as the other!"

Rohan felt a pang of annoyance at himself. "I didn't mean to sleep at all. I wanted to be here when they brought you both back. I wanted to make sure Finn was taken care of and that he wasn't… weren't… well, that his wound was healed."

Finn dropped his hand down to his side where the wound was or, perhaps, had been. Not that Rohan could see whether it was there or not. He was pleased to note that Finn was in fresh clothes, not the bloody rags he'd been wearing. A pair of simple black leggings and a dark green tunic with silver embroidery around the wrists and collar. A black belt cinched the tunic around Finn's slender waist.

"We didn't have to go far to find them. They were looking for us!" Serxio exclaimed with evident delight.

Rohan's eyes sought out Serxio. While Finn was on the bed beside him, Leonid and Serxio stood at the foot of the bed. It was evident from the blankets tossed on the floor by the two chairs by the fireplace that they had been sleeping there. Both were dressed in simple Fae tunics, leggings and thigh-high boots. Leonid wore dark blue and Serxio wore crimson. He imagined that Leonid was missing his armor while Serxio would feel the staid clothes not sufficient plumage for his taste. But they were clean and neat.

Serxio went on with evident relish, “Tela and I met them on the road when they waylaid us!” His eyes sparkled at Finn with admiration as he added, “Finn took her down then and has had her scampering away whenever she’s seen him ever since. Ow! What was that for, Leonid? Why are you elbowing me?”

Finn had stiffened again as Serxio had recalled his use of magic. Rohan turned a quizzical eye on Finn. The young man was light as a feather, but he clearly was strong. Yet how had he gotten around Tela’s magic to pin her to the ground and keep her there? From the too bland expression on Leonid’s face, there was clearly something going on here. But at that moment, Rohan could not have cared. He grasped Finn’s shoulders.

“How did you get all the way here with that wound? Did you find a healer? Leonid, did you carry him?” Rohan peppered them with questions.

“Why don’t we have some breakfast first before we tell each other our tales?” Finn suggested. “If you’re up to getting out of bed yet. Though I’m sure you could eat here on a tray. That might be best.”

“I am *not* staying in this bed one moment longer than I have to,” Rohan said.

Rohan knew he had a mulish expression on his face at the mention of his weakness. While he adored being in a bed with Finn, he had to show them--and himself--that he was capable of standing!

He threw the covers off and swung his legs off the side of the bed. He realized that everyone was watching him intently, ready to swoop in and catch him if he collapsed again as he had last night. Serxio had, undoubtedly, told them about that in his tales last night. He drew in a deep breath before hoisting himself up. There was only the slightest of wobbles before he was standing straight and tall. He let out that breath in relief. He was on the mend! He turned and faced everyone.

“See? I’m fine,” Rohan said triumphantly. Then he took a step and had to catch himself on the bed. He grimaced and waved away help. “I’m all right. Quite a bit better. Though I wonder how long this weakness will last?”

It was more a rhetorical question than anything else, but Ryleth answered him, “I would estimate you’ll be back to yourself by tomorrow morning. That is when we will leave for Aymar with your protection as you promised, Rohan.”

All of them spun around to the now open door where the Fae priestess stood with Thomas behind her. Ryleth had changed out of her priestly robes into something much more practical: dark brown boots, tan leggings and a fawn colored tunic. Her handsome, dark-skinned face surveyed them all but he noted that her eyes alighted on Finn and narrowed slightly.

“You healed Finn so I am bound to my word,” Rohan said agreeably.

Ryleth’s lips pressed together for a moment before she reluctantly said, “He needed no healing as far as I could see, and he requested none.”

Rohan’s forehead furrowed. He glanced back at Finn. He remembered the wound so well. He also remembered that Finn had been feverish, comatose and near death when he’d last seen him. Now the young man’s skin glowed with the golden color it had when they first met. His eyes were bright but with intelligence not sickness. He was kneeling on the bed with no pain in his stance or on his face.

How can this be? Rohan wondered. *Mysteries upon mysteries.*

Finn made an almost imperceptible shake of his head, asking Rohan silently not to pursue this now. Rohan turned back to Ryleth.

“You sent Tela and Serxio out to get Finn and Leonid. You fully intended to honor your promise,” Rohan stated. “So I will honor mine.”

Tension that he hadn’t realized was in Ryleth bled out of her. She clearly had been afraid he would not accompany them to Aymar, because she hadn’t lived up to

her part of the bargain. Perhaps if he was a Fae that would have been his fallback. But he still could see that little Fae girl in the cart, about to be killed by a spider. Who knew what other dangers were in this overgrown forest? He would not turn his back on those in need.

Besides they had no way of returning to Rirea at this time. Maybe Ryleth would know something about Tyreon or, better yet, how the Wall might be opened for them to get back through. His fingers brushed Lightbringer that still lay beside him. There was also the issue of his newly discovered magical powers from his Fae heritage. A Fae priestess might know much about that, too. So, for all those reasons, going on with them was both the honorable and practical thing to do.

"Is Samron agreeable to us remaining another day?" Rohan asked.

He couldn't help the moue of displeasure speaking the other Fae priest's name. The man was scum as far as he was concerned. He hadn't just let Ryleth's people die, he'd worked *with* the spiders to ambush them.

Ryleth let out a dry laugh. "You were correct last evening when you said he wouldn't make a move against the heir. So, he has to let the rest of us stay too because you will it."

"Good, that's something," Rohan said with a shake of his head. "I don't trust him. Anyone who would betray innocents like that is--"

"Desperate," Ryleth said with a twist of her lips. She looked over her shoulder at Thomas then. He was practically cringing with the desire to serve. "We've all done things we've regretted since the forest… changed."

"Yes, well, let's just say I don't want to count on his hospitality for any longer than we need to," Rohan told her.

She nodded. "I agree. However, I am certain you are hungry after your rest. Thomas will bring you food and serve you."

Rohan stared at the traitor. Serxio's upper lip writhed back for a moment. Here was yet another person he did not trust. Rohan had saved Thomas' life, but he had repaid them with treachery. Rohan wouldn't put it past them to poison them if it suited him.

"It would be an honor to serve the heir," Thomas simpered.

In the light, Rohan could see he was a handsome man in his thirties. He wasn't noble, but he had the accent and affect of a well-to-do tradesman's son. Someone who was eager to get ahead and not too worried about how he went about it. He wondered what had waylaid Thomas into the service of the Fae. Whatever his deal was, Rohan was certain that it involved some get-rich-quick scheme.

"After you have supped and bathed, we should speak again," Ryleth said slightly haltingly. "There are many roads to Aymar. I would see which you would advise us to take."

"I'm sure that we have much to discuss. I look forward to it," Rohan stated simply.

He realized only then by the surprised reactions of the others that her request to strategize *with* him was unusual. Thomas stared open-mouthed but then quickly looked down at the floor. Rohan was used to being treated in this manner, of course, but he guessed few humans were here.

It is because she thinks I am this heir, not the king of Rirea, Rohan reminded himself.

For his part, he had never allowed rank to get in the way of strategy. Commoner or noble, if the idea was good, if the objection was wise, he wanted to hear it. But he guessed that on Ryleth's part--at least in regards to humans--she was a woman who kept her own council.

“Yes. Indeed. Thomas, make sure they have all they need,” Ryleth commanded before sweeping out abruptly as if to escape that surprise.

There was silence in the room again as they all looked at Thomas with suspicion--and in the case of Serxio, disgust--in their eyes. Thomas shifted from foot to foot. The man was not a fool. He likely half-wondered if they meant to kill him.

“I just wanted to say--if I might--that I had no idea who you were when I went to my mistress, Rohan,” Thomas began.

“It shouldn’t have mattered that Rohan is the heir! He saved your life! You repaid him with a knife in the back!” Serxio snapped. “We won’t forget it. You’ll not find any friendship here!”

“If I had nothing to offer other than an apology then, yes, I would agree with you,” Thomas said, and there was a flash of intelligence in those black eyes.

Intelligent but hardly trustworthy, Rohan thought again. *I know his type so well.*

“What could *you* offer us that would have any worth other than a plate of eggs and some rashers of bacon? And you’re required to provide those by order of your mistress.” Leonid crossed his powerful arms over his chest and gave a stare that had recruits melting into pools on the ground.

“I don’t have anything… *yet*,” Thomas said.

“Oh, for gods’ sake then what are you blathering on about?” Leonid scowled.

Thomas surprised him by tossing his head back almost proudly. “I can tell you haven’t been among the Fae long...” His eyes cut to Rohan and Finn, “despite you being the heir and all. I’m guessing you were born in Rirea and made your way here somehow?”

None of them confirmed or denied that, but Thomas merely nodded. Rohan had a sinking feeling that Thomas could be useful. He was smart and did what he had to in order to get ahead. He had likely turned scheming into an art form.

“Well, my point is that Ryleth would be absolutely mad to let you go once we reach Aymar. Not just for the reward, but it would be *treason*. If you are really the heir of House Aeturnal then you have a claim to the throne. King Thalanil’s rule has been rocky since things have gone awry in the world. People say it’s because the Ravenspars aren’t the true rulers of the Empire,” Thomas told them simply. “So, you see, she *has* to give you over to King Thalanil. Everyone saw what you did. It will get out. She must show her loyalty or risk execution.”

Finn drew in a sharp breath, and Rohan saw the young man’s hands clench into fists at the thought of this betrayal.

“I’m aware that Ryleth intends to do something very much like that,” Rohan replied dryly. He had never thought otherwise, but this information about issues with Thalanil’s rule was interesting.

Thomas nodded again as if this did not surprise him that Rohan knew, or maybe he was just pretending. “But wouldn’t you like to know what her plans are *before* she puts them in place?”

“She’s going to confide in you?” Serxio’s voice rose sharply with disdain.

“In a way… *yes*.” Thomas smirked. “You see the Fae don’t think of humans as *people*. We’re things like furniture or carts or whatever they need us to be, so they are careless about how they speak around us. Are you worried when you speak about private things in front of your dresser?”

“And if she speaks so carelessly around you about us, you’ll pass it along? In exchange for what?” Rohan asked carefully.

“I want to leave this place. I want to go back to Rirea,” Thomas replied.

Rohan regarded him quietly. He wished it was Emma making this offer. Despite whatever evil deed she might have done twenty years ago, she had remained loyal to them when it counted. This man was a creature of the Fae. He had grown all too used to deals and backstabbing.

"I'll consider it," Rohan said. "You have nothing to trade now in any case."

"I will though. I promise you that. I'll get your breakfast." Thomas turned to go, but then he turned back again, "There is one thing I can offer you now. Free of charge."

"How generous of you." Serxio scowled.

Thomas smirked at Serxio again but then gestured at Finn. "Tela and Ryleth are talking about *him*."

Finn became statue-like, and his green eyes narrowed at Thomas, but he said nothing. Rohan, however, was alarmed at the thought that Finn was even being remarked upon.

"What did they say?" Rohan asked quietly.

Thomas held the moment before he said, "They called him... *unnatural*."

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEATH MAGIC

The raven perched in the corner of the room. Its wings fluttered restlessly. The raven wanted Finn to follow it. None of the others in the room noticed the magical creature. For them, the raven was not there.

The four of them were seated at a round table by a window that looked out onto the village. Finn could see Fae going about their daily lives. More than once, he saw the Fae looking up at their window, likely wondering what they were doing as well.

"Eat a little more, Finn," Rohan urged. "I don't know what animal these eggs come from, but they are delicious, as is the toasted bread and honey."

Finn wrenched his eyes from the raven to his plate that was loaded full of food. The eggs were creamy and delicious. The toast was crisp on the outside and fluffy on the inside. The honey had a faintly floral taste that was incredibly pleasing. The fresh squeezed juice from fruits unknown was tart and sweet. But he had no taste for any of it. The raven rustled its wings again.

"Do you not like it, young sir? I could get you something else," Thomas said obsequiously.

Finn was used to being a servant. He'd been served but only as a child, a time he could hardly remember, so being served should have been… uncomfortable. Yet he didn't have any such feeling being served by Thomas. In fact, he had the distinct desire to crush the man like a bug under his heel. Thomas had betrayed Rohan and Serxio after the battle with Hex. His bowing and scraping manner now didn't change that fact.

"No, everything is fine," Finn said, forcing himself to pick up a fork and take a small bite of the eggs.

The raven flapped its wings again, but Finn took another forkful and ignored it. He felt Rohan's pleasure that he was eating, so he kept going. Rohan stroked Finn's back, and he leaned against Rohan's side, relishing the warmth and strength and affection from his noble lord.

"Thomas, get more of this meat. It's good." Leonid gestured towards what looked like a thick slab of ham.

Thomas did a little bow and hurried out. Leonid watched him carefully, and everyone was silent until they were sure he was gone.

"All right, the little bugger is gone for the moment," Leonid leaned forward across the table and cast his voice low. "What is the plan here to get back home?"

"Are we really going to go with them to Aymar?" Serxio asked, putting down his fork and knife. He was a rather fussy eater and had tucked his napkin into the top of his collar. Finn thought that a stain on his clothes would cause him great pain. "She's going to speak to Thalanil! Thomas is right that she will out you as this heir person! And that sounds bad."

"Yes, that is problematic." Rohan stared into the distance for a moment.

"What is this heir thing exactly? Does anyone know?" Leonid asked. "Other than you can use your sword to destroy spiders by the thousands, Rohan, I'm not really clear on the particulars."

"You're not alone." Rohan's lips pursed. "Other than I have the blood of House Aeturnal in my veins and wield Lightbringer, I don't know. But it's clear that these people have great respect for their former rulers. And with things here not going well, I think they are looking for answers. No matter how slender those answers may be."

"It's so mad that it should be you of all people to be their heir!" Leonid shook his head. "But I guess I should be glad that they're in awe of you enough to keep well away from us for right now."

"Of course, it's also another reason for Thalanil to want you dead," Serxio said.

"What's the other reason?" Finn asked, brow furrowing.

Serxio blinked and then got out, "Oh, because he's a Rirean noble. The enemy. Or the *other* enemy. So, he's double the enemy now, I guess?"

"Oh, right, of course," Finn said, though he had a feeling that wasn't really what Serxio was thinking. Then he asked what he was rather fearful to, but desperately wanted to know, for sure. "You have… have Fae blood then?"

Rohan nodded. "Quite a bit of it. My mother's family especially had many Fae ancestors. It was often a toss up if children would have red eyes and pointed ears or blue eyes and rounded ears."

"Oh… that's… you don't find it difficult in Rirea, do you?" Finn asked.

Rohan studied his face. "No, but I assume you're thinking of the purge under Hugues De Clare right after the king and queen were killed?"

Finn nodded. His hands clenched and unclenched under the table.

"You do know the king put a stop to that. When he took over?" Rohan asked softly.

"Yes, but… but is that really true? I mean… if you performed this magic in Rirea, what would happen?" Finn pushed. "Magic is hidden now in Rirea. But you are noble so… perhaps it is different for you. There would not be a punishment."

Rohan considered this and slowly nodded. "Yes, I see what you are saying. It needs to be made clearer, I think, that people should not be afraid of using magic or revealing Fae heritage."

Does he have such power? Finn wondered. *He acts as if he can simply change the country with a few words. Not in an arrogant way but in a matter of fact sort of way.*

Rohan continued on, "But I also think the problems we're seeing here are an opportunity as much as a hindrance for Rirea."

"Giant monsters and murdering vines are opportunities?" Leonid asked.

Rohan grinned. "In a way. Things are out of balance in both the Empire and Rirea. That life is out of control here while missing at home, there must be a connection."

"The Wall could explain it," Serxio pointed out.

Rohan shook his head. "The damage to his own people is too severe for Thalanil to keep up the Wall."

"Besides, the Wall looks to be for defense," Leonid pointed out and with a wry twist of his lips added, "Rirea is hardly in any position to mount an attack against the Fae. Even with your magic sword adding to our arsenal."

Rohan nodded. That sword was by his side. He hadn't let it out of arm's length. Finn could see the magic inside of Rohan. It burned with a white hot glow. Though

he wasn't sure how he knew, it appeared to him that the sword was a focus and not the source of Rohan's power. That power was the noble lord's alone.

"Perhaps…" Rohan rolled his lips together as he said slowly, "this might be an opportunity for a rapprochement between our two countries. The suffering that is going on could be eased, if not stopped, perhaps if we work together."

"So you'd go and introduce yourself to him when we get to Aymar?" Leonid's disbelief was not at all hidden as he speared another piece of meat and devoured it.

"That's not exactly my plan. I intend to send some sort of message, a note perhaps," Rohan said.

"Well, maybe don't send that note until we have a way out of here," Serxio suggested.

"I hope I can get some information about that out of Ryleth," Rohan explained.

The raven flapped its wings more violently than before, and Finn lifted his head too quickly. The others saw the movement.

"Sorry, just thought I heard something," Finn mumbled and took a bite out of the corner of his toast.

"If only we could find that bloody wolf!" Leonid grimaced. "I'm sure Tyreon can travel freely between Rirea and the Empire."

"I think you're right," Rohan agreed.

"So, we get these people to Aymar and somehow disappear before Ryleth changes her mind and hands us over to King Thalanil and then we… look for Tyreon? Use whatever information we get from people about the Wall? Write a note to Thalanil and hope for the best?" Serxio's gaze flickered between all of theirs. "Is that the plan?"

"When you put it that way, Serxio, it sounds like a very thin plan. But it's all we can do," Rohan said with a tone of command that seemed to ease fears. It was a decision. It was made. He was right.

Maybe the raven will be able to help, Finn thought as it caught sight of the dead thing regarding him intently.

Finn's forehead furrowed. "But…"

"What, Finn?" Rohan urged.

"I think the plan is sound as plans go. But about contacting King Thalanil… he killed the king's parents," Finn said softly. "Can one work with someone like that? And would our king accept any deal you made with the Fae?"

Rohan and the others went strangely tense. Rohan let out a sigh. His expression was rather chagrined and a little shamefaced, which Finn didn't understand at all.

"Finn, I can… I can assure you that the *king* will fully approve of what I do because…" He looked about them as if worried about unseen watchers. "I have to tell you something very important. Something I should have told you when we first met, but I wanted… well, I feel very foolish and ashamed of what I did. I hope you understand why…"

"Whatever it is, Rohan, it is all right," Finn assured him.

Rohan obviously had a secret but Finn had plenty of his own. He could hardly judge the other man for it.

"This may not be the best place to talk about that," Leonid said markedly.

Rohan grimaced. "No, perhaps not." He took Finn's hands in his and looked deeply into Finn's eyes. "When we get back home, I have to tell you something very important."

"All right. You are worrying me a little. Is it bad?" Finn asked.

Rohan shook his head. "No, it is not bad. It is just… I hope you will see me the same way you do now. I don't want to lose that."

Finn blinked at him. “I see you in a better light every moment I am with you.”

Rohan’s smile was as bright as the sun. Serxio made an “awwww” sound while Leonid grunted.

“You’re a good lad, Finn,” Leonid said.

At that moment, the raven *cawed!* It practically had Finn jumping up from his seat. Finn quickly covered the action by standing.

“It’s strange that Thomas hasn’t returned. I’ll see if I can find him and get that meat for you, Leonid,” Finn stated as the raven flew over to the door.

“Ack, you don’t need to do that. I can go myself,” Leonid stated and was about to rise sharply from his seat.

“No, no, I want to ask for something more myself and I… I need to move a bit,” Finn said.

“You’re assuming the door isn’t locked,” Serxio said with a moue of distaste.

Finn was sure it wasn’t or it wouldn’t be because of the raven’s insistence in leaving.

“If you’re sure…” Rohan’s forehead was furrowed in concern and confusion.

Finn lightly touched his cheek. “I am. I’ll be right back.”

The raven was pecking at the door. Finn hurried his steps. The door was unlocked, and he glided into the hallway. He felt Rohan’s eyes on his back filled with worry, concern and caring. He kept that close to his heart. The hallway was empty. He thought he heard the murmurs of voices somewhere down below. The raven flew down the hallways towards the back of the house. There was a set of stairs that hugged the outside of the tree that this house had once been. It was so massive in death that Finn wondered how magnificent it had been in life.

He padded down the stairs following the bird as it led him nowhere near the kitchen, where Thomas likely was, but through a door into a magnificent garden where flowers with unknown names, drowsed in the morning light. Their heavy, multi-colored blooms let out a sweet scent that caused Finn’s shoulders to relax.

The raven soared to the back of the garden, which was nestled up against the magical fence. It landed on a glassy, black stone and *cawed*! Finn frowned. This stone seemed very out of place. It was shaped into a perfect square. Clearly it had been carved. It was the size of a large housecat. He saw no similar stones anywhere about.

Finn approached it, and the raven tapped its beak against the top as if to say, “This is it. This is what I wanted you to see.”

Finn found himself focused on the stone, unable to look anyplace else, and there was a deep sense of familiarity about it. He reached out with a shaking hand and touched the stone. He immediately pulled his hand back. The stone was *cold*. Icy, actually. His fingers were cold and numb. The stone had leached the warmth from him with a simple touch.

“You should not touch that. It is a power stone, though that is not its true name, but it is what we call it,” Ryleth stated.

She was again behind him, and he had not heard her approach. Finn stared into the bird’s dead eyes though and did not turn around. He could see her reflection in them.

“You have a habit of showing up when least expected,” Finn stated as he slowly turned to look at her.

She stood about ten feet away with a staff strapped across her back. A staff for a mage was rather like a sword for a warrior, or at least that was Finn’s impression. For her to be wearing one so openly within the supposed safety of this village was interesting. She made no move towards it, but he kept his own magical ability ready

in case she did.

"I hope that doesn't mean I am unwelcome," she said with a light smile.

"I'm not sure about that," Finn answered. He was surprised by his forthrightness. He was so used to cringing and worrying around his stepfamily's opinion and what they might do to punish him, but coming here had changed him. Facing Marikoth and the creature, learning more about his magic had allowed him to stop cringing. He felt… strong. So strong.

"Truthful!" She nodded her head. "You and Rohan have that in common. You don't mince words. Quite unlike the humans I know."

"Any humans you know have been trapped behind the Wall for 20 years and warped by their time here," Finn found himself saying. "Perhaps humans aren't the problem, but Fae are."

"You have a poor opinion of us?" She searched his face.

He thought of Marikoth again. He thought of being related to that terrible being.

"I think that the Fae are not to be trusted," Finn answered tightly.

"Well, we each have our opinion," she answered, not seeming offended.

He wondered why. She enslaved humans, and Thomas claimed she saw him as furniture. Her behavior when she'd first encountered Rohan and Serxio had done practically a full 180-degree turn.

She believes in the heir. She believes in House Aeturnal. She's desperate and thinks that maybe we hold solutions, Finn realized.

"Do you want to know about the power stone?" She gestured towards the glassy, black stone.

Finn turned and looked at the carved block. For a moment, he thought he could see veins within it that lead to a hollow center. But between one blink and the next that impression was gone.

"If you wish to tell me, I will listen," Finn said, "I have no objection to hearing."

After all, *this* was what the raven had brought him to see. It couldn't be a coincidence that Ryleth came out here to talk about it.

Ryleth crossed her arms at the wrists behind her lower back. Her long white braid shifted over her shoulder as she walked along the crushed stone path to him.

"These stones were placed all over the Empire by House Aeturnal," Ryleth explained. "They are power points. Places where power is stored so that it can be used for larger spells necessary to defend the Empire. House Aeturnal's special gift was being able to create these receptacles for power and to channel power into them. That gift isn't just limited to these power stones. House Aeturnal could enchant weapons, armor, stone, wood, anything really."

"Like Rohan's weapon?"

She nodded. "Like Rohan's weapon. But most of the power he used in that case--"

"Came from him," Finn murmured.

"Yes. There was power stored in the sword but not enough to do what he did against the spiders," she said. "Not that anyone but the heir could have unleashed Vudine's power in any case, little or great."

"It must have surprised you because he looks human," Finn said.

It had surprised him, too, but in the best way. He felt… not alone. He didn't have to hide what he was from Rohan. Yet Marikoth's face--wrenched from beautiful to horrible--flashed before his mind's eye. Maybe he couldn't tell Rohan *everything*.

No, I shouldn't lie to him. I need to tell him the truth and trust he'll still care about me.

Ryleth considered him for long, silent moments, which had Finn shifting. Tela had told her what he could do as well. That his magic was *unnatural*.

Finally, she said, "Everyone is surprising me." She had stopped walking while looking at him, but now she started again. "The last of the power in these stones was drained away when King Thalanil put up the Wall."

"Why did he do that? To evade justice for killing the king and queen of Rirea?" Finn asked.

Her eyebrows rose. "No, it is for protection."

"Protection against Rirea and--"

"No."

Finn blinked. "Protection against what? Against *who*?"

I cannot have you getting in the way of my plans, Marikoth's whispered voice floated through his mind.

Ryleth didn't answer him, but instead went on with her history lesson on House Aeturnal, "House Aeturnal was aided in powering these stones by special Mages. Mages who could drain life."

Finn went very still. He didn't blink. He hardly breathed.

"You see, most mages control the power around them. They can transform it into fire or ice." She created a fireball in one hand with flames flickering on all sides as if tasting the air. A ball of smoking ice appeared in the other. Ghostly wisps of frost dripped through her fingers and drifted towards the ground. "But we are limited in how much we can transform, how much we can take in. But these other mages--the Death Mages--can drain *all* power and use it however they wish."

"Why are you telling me this?" Finn asked softly even as he prepared to drain the life in her and those magical spells if she attempted to use them against him.

"The Empire has been out of balance long before the creation of the Wall, I think. You see how life is here," she said.

She then tipped her head towards the delicate, magical wall that ran along the outside of the city. Finn glanced over and froze. There were *eyes* staring at them from the forest's vastness. They burned redly and did not blink.

"They're not coming back. Not yet. They're still afraid," Finn whispered, though who or what was not yet coming back he didn't know exactly.

"You see, Finn, if a Death Mage and the heir to House Aeturnal *have* returned, those who understand their purpose, their role in nature, would think it a good thing," Ryleth explained, "even if they look human."

Fire and ice streaked past him and burst through the fence towards those eyes. There was a roar of pain, and the crimson orbs disappeared. The fence repaired itself. Finn turned back to her.

"Would King Thalanil think it a good thing?" Finn asked her.

"If he does not… well, I do not know that there will be much of an Empire to rule over in the long run," she answered.

Does she intend to turn us over to him so that maybe he'll listen and enlist our aid? Finn wondered. *Or will she not betray us after we get her and her people safely to Aymar?*

"Do you know…" Finn licked his lips. "Is there anyone who can train a Death Mage? About how to use their powers safely? Could… could *you* do it?"

"I could not, and I know none who can. But I have some old books… if you can read the Fae language," she said.

He shook his head. "No, that is beyond me."

“I will go through them and translate what is applicable for you,” she said.

He realized then that she had never outright asked him if he was a Death Mage. He realized, too, that he had stopped telling himself he wasn’t one. Both of them knew what he truly was.

“One more thing, Finn,” she said and gave him a searching look, “you must be *very* careful who you show your powers to and let live. Death Mages were always set apart. Always feared. And what is feared…”

“Is destroyed,” he finished for her.

She nodded.

At that moment, Rohan came out of the house. Concern was etched into his handsome features. Relief flooded them when he saw Finn, though he appeared leery of seeing Ryleth with him.

“Finn, I thought you were going to the kitchen,” Rohan said with a slight bit of disapproval. “I was worried when you didn’t return.”

“I’m sorry about that, Rohan,” Finn said as he walked towards the noble lord. “I caught sight of this beautiful garden, and I got lost in thought.”

The worried creases in Rohan’s forehead smoothed out. “Ah, well, you should rejoin us.”

“I’m sure you would like to bathe after your great adventures. We usually use communal pools, but we have one that is more private,” Ryleth said. “When you are ready, I will have Thomas take you.”

“Finn needs to eat a bit more.” A stern look from Rohan told Finn he would be finishing his plate. Finn felt a warm sense being cared for. “And then we’ll be ready.”

Finn joined Rohan by the door. He looked back and saw that the raven was nowhere in sight. Its job was done. For now.

BELIEF

The pool was glorious and private. It was in a secluded part of the village, not on the outer edge but by a cliff face where a waterfall tumbled over the edge and fed the pool below. Rohan could not wait to go under the waterfall and feel the water pounding against his sore shoulders. Spicy-scented soaps and soft sponges were set out along with fluffy towels and fine silk wraps that they could wear as they lay on loungers beside the pool.

"Do you approve?" Thomas asked, already seeing the eager look on Rohan's face.

"It will suffice," Rohan answered.

"A sight bit of difference between this and what you could expect in Rirea though, yes? The Fae really know how to make bathing grand," Thomas said, undeterred by Rohan's curtness. "I'm looking forward to opening such a bathing place when we return to Rirea."

"You're very certain you're returning," Rohan stated.

Finn, who was the only one accompanying him as Leonid and Serxio wanted to give them some alone time, just stared at Thomas with narrowed eyes. The beautiful young man did not like Thomas. Not one bit. Thomas ignored Finn, which was not wise, but it was understandable. Finn looked so delicate and pretty, like he couldn't hurt a fly, but Leonid had told Rohan and Serxio how misleading that impression was when Finn had left the room.

"Look," Leonid began with a grimace. "I don't want to talk behind his back, and I'm sure Finn will tell you all about it himself, but--"

"We should give him the chance to tell me himself then if you're so certain of it," Rohan said.

But Leonid pressed on, "He's been reticent. You heard what he said earlier about magic and being Fae in Rirea. He thinks it's a death sentence."

Rohan grimaced. "My uncle was… enraged and grief-stricken. Hurt makes some men hard, for a time at least."

"Exactly, and considering what Finn can do--"

"I realize that Finn has secrets. But it is not exactly like I have been honest with him either," Rohan pointed out. He dare not mention, even in passing here, that he was king of Rirea.

"Maybe not. But this… is important," Leonid continued to push. "He has magic. Not normal magic, I don't think."

"But what do you know about magic? Natural or otherwise?" Serxio scoffed as he dabbed his lips with his napkin.

Leonid scowled at him. "It's just a thing you can tell. And the Fae find it unnatural too. Tela is terrified of him, remember? Do you think that arrogant Mage would be scared of just another magic user?"

Serxio's expression fell. "I suppose not. And I didn't even realize he was using magic on her. Hers is quite flashy in comparison."

"It was like he had a gigantic paw on top of her," Leonid explained. "But that is hardly what I'm talking about! There was this monster at the last village. Finn… Finn faced it with nary a weapon or shield. He rode up to the damned thing, got off his horse and… I felt he could have crushed it. Snuffed out its life. But he didn't. He… he talked to it. Controlled it somehow."

"None of this sounds disturbing," Rohan objected. "It sounds like a kind and good sort of magic."

"I didn't tell you about the bit," Leonid said. "He healed himself by draining the life of the forest around us. He's not wounded anymore. He's still pretending to be, but he forgets."

Rohan frowned. He'd noticed that, too. Finn seemed quite shy about revealing that fact to him. Almost ashamed.

"I like the boy. More than like him. I think he's a good lad, but… I think he's got some dangerous abilities, Rohan," Leonid said. "And powers like these… they're *special*. They don't come from nowhere. He claims to be a servant, but… but something else is going on here."

"So, you think he's pretending to get close to Rohan?" Serxio's expression grew alarmed.

"No, I don't. I just think Finn is more than he seems, and that means there are others behind him. Powerful people. That's all I'm saying." Leonid splayed his hands over the table.

Rohan wanted to burst out with a defense of Finn. He wanted to tell Leonid that he was wrong but he didn't. Maybe it was because he, himself, had discovered this impossible thing about himself. Not to mention that he would have to reveal to Finn he was *king*. These weren't small things. So if Finn had something to tell him just as large? He would accept it. He would not be angry or feel betrayed.

"You are likely right that there is more to Finn than there seems. Perhaps more than he even knows," Rohan said carefully, "but I trust him, Leonid. I know he means me no harm. And we could use a bit of *dangerousness* in this place. We may need it."

Now, Rohan watched Finn as the young man surveyed the secluded pool for any dangers that might assail them. He was certain he was right to trust Finn. Whatever secrets the young man had were not ones that were to harm him. He turned back to Thomas.

"I will prove my worth to you, sir," Thomas said earnestly, breaking him from his thoughts. "I've left waters and fruit for you here to drink. If you wish anything else just call for me, and I'll come--"

"We won't need you. I want utter privacy. If you wish to be of use, you'll be out of earshot, but you will also see to it that no one else approaches," Rohan told him.

Thomas gave a brief bow. "It shall be as you wish."

After he had trotted down the path and out of sight, Finn remarked, "He spies on people. He will try to spy on us. He cannot help himself. But I… I will know if he comes near."

"You will know?" Rohan asked.

Finn's green eyes became shadowed. "Yes."

He did not lie about how he would be able to do that, but he didn't say how he could either.

He is guarded about this, Rohan thought. *I must gain his trust. I wish I could just tell him now that I am King of Rirea and that his gifts and heritage are no*

danger to him from me.

"I won't let your bath be disturbed," Finn added.

"*My* bath?" Rohan lifted his eyebrows. "I had hoped it would be *our* bath. Or are my hopes to be dashed?"

Finn blinked, and his cheeks flushed with color. "Oh! I--I did not realize that you wanted… uhm… I thought… I don't know what I thought. But I'm glad I was wrong."

Rohan was dressed in a pair of light pants and no shirt. He had been provided with slip-on shoes to walk over the stone path that connected the house with the pool. They had seen relatively few Fae on their way here. He was certain that Ryleth or Samron was behind that. But those they had seen had stopped dead in their tracks to watch him. Some had made a strange motion with their hands as if blessing themselves. There had been no hostility or really even fear, just… uncertainty.

They were likely wondering if he really was this heir or if their eyes had deceived them the night before. The fact that he carried Lightbringer with him, even to the bath, hadn't gone unnoticed. He'd heard whispers of "Vudine" on many tongues. But now, thankfully, he and Finn were away from all eyes.

"I want to make love to you, Finn." Rohan set down Lightbringer at the side of the pool and toed off his shoes. "Will you let me?"

"I… *yes*."

Rohan then undid the tie of his pants at his waist. He let them drop down to his feet. He stepped out of them, completely nude. Finn watched him do this as if he couldn't quite believe his luck. There were a set of steps cut into the side of the pool. He put a foot on the first step and the water washed over his foot. It was brisk but not cold.

"Refreshing! Shall I be the first victim?" Rohan teased as Finn had still not moved to undress.

He remembered how shy Finn had been about being naked before him the other day. Now, he wondered if Finn was worried to show him that there was no wound. He would give Finn time to wrestle with it. Rohan walked down the three other steps, and the water rose up to mid-chest. He ducked his head under the water then surfaced, slicking his hair back out of his eyes. He blinked up at Finn. The young man had moved closer and had undone his belt. But Finn's hands twitched with the hem of his tunic instead of drawing it over his head.

Rohan offered a hand to Finn. "Come to me, Finn. Please."

Finn's lips parted, and the color heightened on his cheeks. "I… I…"

"I know that the wound isn't there, Finn," he said.

Finn blinked rapidly and wrapped his arms around himself protectively.

"It's all right. Leonid told me what happened," Rohan continued.

"But he doesn't know what happened! I--I lied to him," Finn breathed and looked terribly guilty.

"And I'm sure you had your reasons. Though… I hope you come to trust me and tell me the truth," Rohan said, feeling quite the hypocrite at that moment.

Finn stared at the ground. His fingers fussed with the tunic. "I want to. But for so long someone finding out what I can do--not that I knew I could do this!--was dangerous. It's how my stepfamily has… well, that doesn't matter. Knowing I could do magic meant knowing I was part Fae and…"

"And you thought the king would kill you?" Rohan breathed as if he was confirming for himself what the others had been saying.

Finn nodded. "Isn't it true? Wouldn't he?"

Rohan grimaced, and his hands clenched underneath the water. As he had told Leonid and Serxio, his uncle's rage and grief had caused him to lash out at all Fae. Anyone who seemed to have any sympathies at all to the Empire had been summarily executed. No trial. No justice. Just death. Rohan had put a stop to it when he assumed the throne, but the scar of those actions was still there and still affecting his people. Like Finn. What was worse was now he knew about his uncle's love triangle with King Thalanil. He was certain that had fueled part of his uncle's anger.

"No, Finn. You must trust me on this for right now, but neither your magic nor your Fae blood will matter to the king. Only the content of your heart will," Rohan assured him. He extended a hand again. "Come to me. Know you are safe. I will let nothing happen to you."

Finn tilted his head to the side and slowly smiled. "I believe you."

The young man lifted the tunic over his head. There no longer was any dirty, bloody bandage made up of napkins. Instead, there was smooth, golden skin that was completely unmarked. There was absolutely no evidence of the terrible wound that had been there. No puckered scar even. Whatever Finn had done to restore himself went beyond simple healing.

Rohan found himself saying, "There's no sign of what I did to you. That almost eases the guilt I have."

Finn's eyes widened. "It was not your fault! I jumped in front of Tyreon! And--"

"I should not have been so quick to attack," Rohan interrupted.

"He's a very big wolf," Finn said with a shrug. "I was scared of him, too, when I first dreamed of him. But he's just a soft baby when he likes you."

"Likes being the important word there." Rohan gave him a wry smile.

"I think he would like you if you… let him," Finn said.

"Well, I am open to it. We need him to get back to Rirea. He has a way of opening the Wall," Rohan said, and Finn nodded his understanding.

"If I sense him, I'll let you know and try to lure him to us," Finn said.

His hands now fussed at his leggings.

"Do you want me to turn around so you can get in?" Rohan offered, even as he so very wished to look upon Finn in full sunlight like this.

He saw Finn struggling with this. "I don't know why you'd want to see me naked."

"Finn--"

"I'm so scrawny. Not big like you. I wish I had muscles like you. Or, at least, didn't look so… skeletal," Finn explained.

"You are beautiful to me."

And Finn was. The only thing about Finn's skinniness that bothered him was that it wasn't natural for the young man. It was caused by starvation. By want. He would change that.

"Again… I believe you," Finn admitted with a laugh. "I wish my fears were less than my beliefs."

"Let me prove to you that I am safe to trust," Rohan said and kept his hand proffered.

Finn gulped and nodded. He pulled off the boots that the Fae had given him and neatly placed them beside his folded tunic. He scrunched his bare toes on the soft grass as his thumbs hooked into the waistband of his leggings. With another deep breath, Finn pushed the leggings down until they were by his ankles and he could step out of them. Finn paused before he stood up again.

“Well? See? Too skinny!” Finn pronounced as his hands moved about him, not sure what part of himself he wanted to cover.

“That’s not what I see,” Rohan told him kindly. “I see grace and refinement. I see delicacy and loveliness.”

Finn had long legs like a fawn’s. He had narrow hips and a slender, if finely muscled, chest. The only hair on him was on his head and between his legs. The hair around his cock was more gold. His skin had that healthy, sun-kissed look. His features were so fine. And those eyes. Green as the forests. He said all of this out loud. A beautiful, delicate pink suffused Finn’s cheeks the more he spoke, and those questing, blocking hands stilled at his sides.

“You make me sound handsome,” Finn said softly. “You make me… *feel* special.”

“You are both of those things,” Rohan assured him.

Finn padded over to the steps into the pool and took Rohan’s hand. He let out a little “aie” at the pool’s temperature.

“I promise you it gets better once you’re fully in,” Rohan told him as Finn waded fully into the pool.

Then they were fully together. Parts of their bodies touched. Stomachs and thighs and cocks brushing against one another. He brought their linked hands together to his lips and kissed the back of Finn’s hand. He held it to his lips even after the kiss finished.

“I was so worried I’d lost you,” Rohan whispered.

“I was with you… when you fought Hex and after…” Finn told him. “There’s so much I have to tell you. I should tell you now before we go further again. I--”

Rohan ran a finger across Finn’s lips, leaving a trail of cool water. “As do I have some things to confess. But none of that matters right now.”

Finn shook his head. “It may! You don’t know--”

“I know you, Finn. I may not know all you can do. I may not know your heritage. But I know you,” Rohan stated emphatically. “I know the person you are, and that is why there is *nothing* you can tell me that will make me not want to make love to you right now.”

Finn’s disbelief turned to agreement. “All right, but you must let me tell you sometime. After we make love.”

“After,” Rohan agreed solemnly, but then with a little playfulness added, “I want to go under the waterfall. What about you?”

Finn grinned. “As do I.”

Hand in hand, the two of them swam over to the waterfall. The spray caused Rohan to squint even before they were fully underneath the stream of water. He grinned at Finn who grinned back. Then they were under the water. Rohan’s eyes closed. He relished the feeling of his body being pounded by cool water and spray bathing his face. He tipped his head back and water sluiced over his hair, straightening the waves until they lay like a form-fitting cap. He pulled out of the water to look at Finn.

The young man also had closed his eyes. His mouth was open, and he was drinking in some of the fresh water. He ran his hands over his head to slick back his hair. The sunlight picked out gold strands.

Rohan could not help himself. His hands slid around Finn’s slender waist, and he crushed the young man to him. His lips found Finn’s, and they shared a clear-water kiss. Finn wrapped his arms and legs around Rohan. He spun them under the waterfall’s fury. He heard Finn’s laughter over the thundering of the water.

The two of them dove beneath the water. Rohan was able to open his eyes to see Finn gracefully skim the sandy bottom before turning so that his front was to the water's surface and Rohan above him. A few bubbles leaked out of the corner of Finn's mouth as he smiled. They broke the surface together, both gasping.

Then they were kissing again. Finn's mouth was hot against his own. Their tongues tangled, sliding against one another's. They were slow and deep kisses that had heat building in Rohan's groin. His cock was already lengthening and thickening between his thighs. He could feel that Finn's was as well. His hand went behind Finn's head to cradle it just so in order for him to give a soul-searing kiss. He wanted to put all his fears and hopes into that kiss. All the tenderness he felt towards the young man who had come to his rescue *twice*.

He trailed a hand down Finn's chest to the young man's cock and cupped it. He rolled Finn's balls in his fingers. Finn jerked against him. His fingernails dug into Rohan's broad back and then raked down his spine. His arousal grew and his cock insistently poked against Finn's stomach and thighs.

He stroked Finn's cock with an eager hand. Finn moaned into their continuing kisses. He paid special attention to Finn's sensitive cock head. His thumb spread open the slit and then played along the prominent vein on the back of the shaft. Finn shivered and scrabbled against him.

"I'm going to--to cum, Rohan," Finn gasped.

"That is the idea. I need something slick to guide my way into your body. Your semen will do nicely," Rohan murmured against his lips.

He lifted the young man out of the pool so that he was sitting on the edge as he continued to stroke his cock. He spread Finn's slender thighs and leaned down to lick the top of the young man's cock. Finn cried out with pleasure. He gripped Rohan's shoulders tightly.

Rohan relished the earthy yet citrusy taste of Finn's precum on his tongue. He went in for more. He swirled his tongue over Finn's cock head before taking the whole plump thing into his mouth. Finn curled over his back, moaning and whispering words of desire and adoration.

Rohan swallowed Finn's cock to the root. Only when he felt his bottom lip meet Finn's furry balls did he swallow. Finn let out an inarticulate cry and raked his fingers over Rohan's back once more. Rohan could feel Finn's cock beginning to swell in his mouth and throat, preparing to release his creamy semen. He pulled off and went down again once more, sucking hard on the final way to release the sweet penis from the furnace of his mouth.

Just as his lips left Finn's cock, semen began to erupt from the young man's slender body. His body arched as Rohan captured all of the pearlescent cum he could in one hand. His other hand was braced around Finn's lower back so that he did not fall. Finn's body trembled and shuddered as he came. His eyes were closed, and his mouth was open. Then he was curling over Rohan again, clutching at him, as he breathed softly.

Rohan was not going to soothe him but bring him back to life again as his one hand, slick with cum, went around to Finn's buttcheeks. He spread them and delved for the opening in Finn's body. There was a whimper and a gasp as he circled that opening with slippery fingers. With Finn's form relaxed from his orgasm, Rohan eased a finger into Finn's body up to the knuckle. An eager moan came from Finn as he thrust and pulled out that finger.

When he added a second finger, Finn's breath gushed against his skin and the young man was kissing any part of Rohan he could reach. Frantic, desperate kisses as Rohan scissored those fingers as he drew them out and plunged them back inside.

Fine tremors went through Finn's body as a third finger joined the other two, and Rohan's thrusts became faster and deeper.

"Now, now, now," Finn murmured. "In me. Now."

"Whatever you want, Finn," Rohan whispered back.

Rohan lifted Finn back into the water. The young man's legs wrapped around his waist as they kissed those deep, long kisses. The slickness would not last in the water so Rohan could not wait to enter Finn's body any longer. While one hand held Finn up, the other guided Rohan's cock to Finn's opening.

Finn whined into their kiss as the head of Rohan's cock popped through the tight ring of muscle around the opening to his body and slid home. Finn dug his heels into Rohan's lower back to pull Rohan all the way into him. Rohan groaned in pleasure as his cock was surrounded by heat and tightness. Finn bore down on him to keep him inside, and Rohan gasped as he nearly came then and there.

"Not yet, not yet," Rohan said breathlessly. "Not until I make you cum again, too."

Finn seemed incapable of any more speech and instead just kissed him again and again in seeming agreement. Rohan rocked forward against Finn, drawing his cock only a little bit out and then snugging it back fully in. Finn's breathing quickened when he added a hip twist to that, aiming for that secret place in men that makes them go wild.

Rohan tweaked Finn's nipples, loving the moans and whines Finn made from that little bit of pain, which enhanced his pleasure. Finn's cock was already starting to plump and harden again. It rose triumphant from its nest of brown and gold curls. Rohan's cock seemed to pulse with every beat of his heart. He was now drawing out near half way before thrusting into Finn's willing body. The water frothed around them as their coupling became more frantic, as arousal filled them both with heat and light and the need to reach completion.

Rohan grunted as he thrust in one last time. Finn pulled himself closer to Rohan. His balls were tight against Finn's ass. His cock swelled. Finn bit his right shoulder as the young man's cock jerked between their bellies. They clutched at one another. There was a gasp from them both as they both found their climax at the same time.

His cock erupted inside of Finn sending gush after hot gush of semen to paint the young man's insides. Beautiful pearlescent streams of cum left Finn's cock and painted both of their bellies. There was then this burst of heat and electricity that seemed to flow from Finn to him. The hair on his body stood on end. He tilted his head back and let the feeling suffuse him.

Shaking as aftershocks rocked them both, Rohan and Finn slowly and deliberately kissed. Rohan's eyelids were shut. He concentrated on the connection between their bodies as they both breathed. He still felt those electrical pulses between them as if a line of energy connected them.

"R-Rohan," Finn whispered in between kisses.

"What, beloved?" The endearment slipped from between his lips like he'd been saying it forever. And he didn't regret it one bit.

"Rohan, your arm… your skin… oh, it's beautiful," Finn whispered.

Rohan slowly opened his eyes and looked down at the underside of his right forearm where Finn was delicately running his fingers. Stretching from his wrist to his elbow were shimmering, golden Fae runes like those on Lightbringer's blade when they were powered up.

"You did this, Finn," he murmured in awe. "You… gave me this…"

"I didn't. I… oh… I *did*."

Finn was looking over his shoulder. Rohan turned them around so he could see the wall of vines that had trailed down the rockface of the waterfall, almost choking each other, were only *half* there. Half of the vines had turned gray, and when the wind blew, they broke apart into tiny pieces and were blown away, leaving a *healthy* amount of vines behind. Rohan found himself reaching towards those remaining vines, and there was an electric sizzle in his fingers before the vines began to flower with gorgeous blooms. Rohan let out a soft laugh.

"By the gods," he breathed, "what we can do together."

"Yes, yes, what we can do," Finn agreed then added, "Rohan, I need to tell you everything. Can I do that now?"

Rohan kissed him deeply. "Yes, Finn, tell me everything."

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

The caravan was ready to move out. Finn stroked Sweetfire's neck. The mare was not eager to move after being stuffed full of sweet grass and other treats by the townsfolk. The Fae had utterly spoiled the horses, falling in love with them over the short time period they'd been there. Even now, some of the Fae were sneaking Sweetfire fruit similar to apples and speaking in soft voices to her as they stroked her nose. He'd discovered that horses were unusual in the Empire as the general populace rode sicens and the nobles flew wyverns.

The sicens fascinated Finn with their dragon-like heads and saurian bodies. The way they snuffled and let out low cries made them seem cute. *Seem,* though, was the operative word as Serxio was finding out at that moment. Jacona had decided that his leg looked tasty as he was getting up into his horse's saddle. Serxio twitched out of the way at the last moment and instead of receiving a bite, his thigh was covered in saliva.

"Ah! Ryleth! Call your creature off! She's trying to eat me!" the foppish young lord said as Jacona licked his boot and lowed mournfully.

"It is because you look so sweet!" Tela laughed as her sicen ambled towards Serxio too, wanting its own taste.

"How could I? I am in these drab rags and this huge cloak with the floppy hood!" Serxio complained. "This is truly low fashion!"

"There you go again! Thinking the clothes make the man," Leonid teased. "But it's the man that makes the clothes!"

"Well, it would have to be that in your case, Leonid," Serxio sniffed. "You're always wearing that tatty armor. No one would think of you as anyone at all if they went by that."

"My tatty armor has kept you safe a time or two!" Leonid scowled at Serxio.

Tela just laughed harder at their bickering. Ryleth gave a small smile as she got up on Jacona and wheeled the sicen away from Serxio's tasty limbs.

Serxio wasn't alone in wearing a voluminous cloak and hood. Finn, Rohan and Leonid also had them on. The hoods were to cover their unpointed ears. Humans carrying weapons would cause too many questions. The horses alone were conspicuous.

Finn looked over at Rohan who was kissing Tempest's nose and speaking sweetly to the warhorse. Tempest's ears flickered almost continuously as Rohan spoke. The horse's dark eyes were fixed on Rohan as if listening to every word and, seemingly, drinking in the sight of the man.

I was right when I realized Marikoth couldn't possibly be Rohan when he didn't show concern for Tempest, Finn thought with a smile.

Rohan knew all about Marikoth now. After their lovemaking, they had gently bathed one another as Finn told him in halting terms about his unknown Fae father, the magic that had exploded out of him after his mother's death and then his stepfamily's *deal* with him, a deal he now realized was similar to one a Fae might make with a human. It was all one-sided and based upon a misunderstanding. Rohan's expression had grown incredibly grim when he understood Finn's situation. He had stirred angrily.

"This cannot be *allowed*," Rohan had growled. "You *will* be Lord of Tanglewood again."

"There's nothing to be done," Finn said with a shrug. "My legal existence has been wiped out, and the King of Rirea himself would have to reinstate me."

Rohan gave out a particularly bitter. "By the gods, how one lie…"

"Rohan?"

Rohan cupped his face. "Trust me that all the wrongs done to you shall be undone."

Finn wouldn't let himself hope that Rohan could somehow do this. It didn't matter. That he *wanted* to alone was more than Finn had ever had from anyone in a position of relative power. Regardless, he would no longer have to work for his stepfamily with no reward. There was no real threat over his head. He was free. Free to be with Rohan. If Rohan would choose to have him near… But he did not touch upon his hopes here. It was too hard and they were too large to fit through his throat.

Finn had then explained to Rohan all about his meeting with Marikoth and everything the Death Mage had told him. He'd confessed his fear of being like the dark Fae. But Rohan had caressed his face and looked at him so lovingly.

"Never, Finn. You could never be like that. Whatever happened to him to make him like that, there was something already inside, a seed that bloomed," Rohan said.

"But I was able to overcome him. I drained him to heal myself. Not just the vegetations, Rohan. I drained *Marikoth's* life, a person's life," Finn emphasized.

"You didn't kill him, Finn, though he *would* have deserved it," Rohan said, then muttered, "And if I ever see him, I *will* kill him--"

"No! I don't want you anywhere near him! Never!" Finn's heart was in his throat. "He's a killer, Rohan! He's mad! He'd hurt you, and I could never--"

"It's all right, Finn. It's all right," Rohan soothed him and held him close as Finn trembled.

Finn buried his face in Rohan's neck and relished his strength. Yet, he knew that things were not all right outside of them. Marikoth still had his plan. Whatever that plan was, it would be terrible.

And it has to be stopped, Finn thought.

Finn turned his gaze from Rohan as he saw movement at the gate. It was Samron. He wore his purple and gold priestly robes, but he appeared less regal in them than Ryleth or Tela had the night before. Maybe it was how he held his staff with a white-knuckled grip or the way his lips writhed back from his teeth as he glared at the caravan. He wanted them *gone*.

"Are you off yet, Ryleth?" Samron asked archly even as he furtively glanced at Rohan.

Ryleth turned to face him. "We are. I, again, make my entreaty that you and your people should come with us."

"We will be safe behind our walls," Samron said with a shake of his head.

“Not for long,” Ryleth answered sadly. “The creatures will not stay away forever, Samron. Once the heir leaves--”

“You worry about your people, Ryleth. I will worry about mine!” Samron snapped and gestured for the gate to be shut.

The Fae in Tradavor were like huddled birds behind Samron. Their expressions grew more and more hopeless as the gate closed, cutting off the view of the caravan and Rohan. In just a short time, they had come to rely a little upon Rohan, if for only his physical presence.

After their bath, he and Rohan had drifted back towards the house, arm in arm. Finn had never felt so peaceful. A little Fae girl--who had clearly been waiting for them--practically popped a foot in the air as soon as she saw Rohan. She raced over to Rohan with a small woven charm in her hand.

Her voice was musical as she offered the bit of stone and ribbon to Rohan. Rohan gracefully dropped to one knee so that he was almost at eye level with her. He replied in the same musical tongue as he took the offering. He wrapped it around his wrist of the arm where the golden tattoos still shone.

“Tie this for me, Finn?” he asked.

Finn did. “Who is she?”

“Her name is Jani. She lost her mother yesterday to the spiders,” he said.

Recalling Serxio’s dramatic retelling. “Lightbringer came to your hand after that.”

“Yes.”

Jani was staring at the wrapped blade. Rohan held it out so that she could touch the silk wrapping around it. Her fingers barely brushed the material before she pulled them back and up to her mouth. The young Fae woman she had been standing with--perhaps her sister--came over then. She put her hands on Jani’s shoulders and spoke to Rohan haltingly as well. He inclined his head.

“She’s thanking you for saving their lives, isn’t she?” Finn guessed.

“Yes.”

“And you’re telling her there is no need for thanks,” Finn said with a small smile.

Rohan lifted his right eyebrow. “Yes, but how did you know that?”

“Because I know you.”

Then, as if Jani and her sister had opened the floodgates, people from all over Tradavor, both local and visitor alike, lined up to speak with Rohan. Finn felt a momentary qualm at having the attention of all those people. He also wanted to make sure that none of them were going to harm Rohan. They thought he was the heir. Some people might not like that.

But as person after person came to speak with Rohan, none seemed to have evil intent. There was awe and uncertainty, but Rohan did not act as if such behavior was strange. In fact, he seemed quite comfortable sharing a few soothing words with each person, tousling a child’s hair, shaking a hand or offering a pat on the shoulder. Finn could see from the looks on the Fae’s faces as they left that they felt blessed by his attention. Each of them felt that they had received individual attention from him that was special and different than what everyone else had received.

As the line dwindled, Finn saw that Rohan’s shoulders were slumping. He was growing tired again. He should have been resting to be prepared for the road ahead.

“Come, let’s get inside,” Finn had said and gently tugged him towards the house.

Rohan had nodded, and after the last well-wisher was gone, he and Finn had walked slowly to the house. They'd taken a nap together until dinner when Ryleth joined them and discussed paths to Aymar. After that, it had been back to sleep. Since Leonid and Serxio were there, they didn't make love again, but that didn't matter because just being in Rohan's arms, having him kiss Finn's neck and murmur words of adoration in Finn's ears had been more than enough.

"Samron is a fool, Ryleth," Tela said with a frown, drawing Finn out of his memories of the day before.

"I hope he is not because his people will pay for it if he is," Ryleth answered wearily. "Let's get on our way. Rohan, are you ready to lead us to Aymar?"

Rohan was lifting himself up on Tempest as he answered, "I am!"

Then Rohan rode to the head of the caravan where Finn already was, and smiled broadly at him.

"Ready to be back on the road?" Rohan asked, his right hand resting on the base of Lightbringer's hilt.

"Yes, I am glad that we are leaving here. I do not think it will remain safe for long," Finn admitted.

"Do you sense anything?" Rohan asked with a slight frown.

Finn had that momentary spark of fear followed quickly by joy at that question. Now that Rohan knew about his magic he found himself eager to use it to protect them. He let his senses surge outwards.

Finally, Finn shook his head. "There are no large life forms anywhere near here right now or the path ahead."

"Good. Will you keep an eye out?" Rohan asked.

"Of course." Finn nodded. "You will know if anything is coming near. I promise."

Rohan leaned over and kissed him lightly. Finn felt the pleasured blush appear on his cheek, and he ducked his head. Rohan put two fingers under his chin and lifted his head up so that they were eye to eye.

"I must kiss you as often as possible, for you are so beautiful when you blush," Rohan told him.

Finn blushed harder, but he was smiling, utterly pleased.

Serxio and Leonid joined them with Tela and Ryleth behind them. Slowly, the caravan started down the road. Finn continued to stretch out his senses to make sure that no creatures got near them unawares. Rohan kept a hand at all times on Lightbringer and his eyes searching the trees.

"Have you seen Emma?" Serxio asked Rohan.

"Who is Emma?" Leonid asked with a cocked eyebrow. "One of your love conquests?"

"No! She's one of the people that Rohan saved from Hex," Serxio said, looking offended even with most of him being mostly covered by the cloak and hood. "She helped me with Rohan."

"I haven't," Rohan said sadly. "I believe that she is avoiding us for fear we will ask her what Ryleth's comments meant."

"What do you mean?" Finn asked.

"She made a deal. She told us it was to cure her mother of a disease in exchange for service," Rohan explained. "Ryleth indicated it was for something quite different."

"Even if it was, she helped us readily enough, and her mother is likely dead either way due to the time difference between here and Rirea," Serxio said quite loyally.

“Time difference?” Finn frowned.

“Time moves much slower here than it does in Rirea,” Rohan told him. “She hadn’t been aware that 20 years had passed since the Wall was put up.”

“So how long will we have been gone by the time we get back to Rirea?” Finn asked.

Rohan grimaced. “I don’t know. But I fear that there will be much consternation with my absence.”

“Your uncle will keep things afloat,” Leonid said. Strangely, he bit his lip as if he shouldn’t have said that.

Rohan nodded, but he still looked grim.

“Has anyone seen Thomas?” Leonid asked with a twist of his lips. He kept his voice low so that Ryleth and Tela could not hear them.

“He is an oily creature,” Rohan stated.

“We can’t trust him for anything!” Serxio shook his head in disgust. “He would betray us as easily as help us again. The only person he cares about is himself.”

“That is one thing we agree on.” Leonid nodded.

They ran into no creatures or other impediments for the first two days of travel. It seemed to Finn that as they moved down the roads towards Aymar that the creatures continued to give them a wide berth, moving out of their path far before they arrived. The vegetation, however, was another matter.

At night they had to keep fires burning all along the length of the caravan as the Battle Mages could not continually keep up shields between the caravan and the forest. There had been dozens of times when either Rohan and Finn had been roused from sleep to stop vines from dragging people off. Finn had kept his powers mostly hidden. He knew that they disturbed people. They were slightly more comfortable with Rohan wielding the glowing Lightbringer, but it was exhausting for him. He had clearly not recovered from what he’d done with the spiders.

Yet Finn could not help loving the nights as he and Rohan would spoon together to sleep. Finn kept his magic protectively around them, Serxio and Leonid. Nothing would harm the people he cared for. His and Rohan’s romance was smiled at by Rohan’s friends, but it surprised him that Ryleth seemed happy about it, too.

The second night on the road she approached Finn while Rohan was reviewing maps and villages that they might encounter up ahead. They would not stay in another village for fear of them finding out about Rohan, him, Serxio and Leonid but also because there were fears that the monsters would just come back with a vengeance after they had left. So where they bedded down for the night was important.

Finn was feeding one of the fires when Ryleth arrived with a journal under one arm. It was a slender volume. She sat down cross-legged by his fire.

“The Death Mages were always paired with a member of House Aeturnal. Stories were told of great romances between them. I thought they were just stories but perhaps not.” Ryleth stroked the book’s tattered cover. “You and Rohan… well, it is what I expected and yet… so strange to see.”

She was not one for small talk, and Finn was grateful for that as he wasn’t much either.

“Rohan is a… noble where we’re from. I’m a servant. Not noble,” Finn said with a wince.

He had been able to put aside that reality since coming to the Empire. Though if he could somehow become Lord of Tanglewood then maybe… but he could not even *hope* that for now. The crash of his dreams would destroy him.

Ryleth’s brows drew together. “That can’t be true, Finn.”

“Why not?” Finn asked as he paused in feeding a few dry sticks into the fire’s base.

“Because Death Mages come from only *one* House in the Empire,” she said.

Finn immediately thought of what Marikoth had said. Finn had to be the offspring of Marikoth, his brother or his father. Finn had been certain that Marikoth was royal. Or, at least, had been. Yet, being from a noble Fae House, would it even matter in Rirea? Or make the chasm between him and Rohan greater than noble and servant?

“What House?” Finn asked finally.

“Ravenspar,” she said.

“Ravenspar?” he repeated, not quite believing what she had just said. “*King Thalanil Ravenspar*?”

The raven, which only he could see, *cawed*! And flapped its wings. It was seated on a branch right over his head. It had kept pace with the caravan since they left Tradavor. It had not soared ahead or diverged, so Finn knew they were on the right track.

“Yes, our king. *The* Fae king. Thalanil Ravenspar,” she said. “You are a part of this House.”

Finn just stared at her. “You think I’m… related to your king?”

Could that be possible? No, Finn would never be so lucky to be Thalanil’s son! If he were then…what? Did he think he could announce himself to Thalanil when they reached Aymar? Ask the Fae king for help for them? Maybe even for Rirea? No, that was absurd. Utterly absurd. He was likely Marikoth’s son! Not that he knew if Thalanil was any better than Marikoth, really.

“You have to be in some way. I heard…” She paused and then lowered her voice, “King Thalanil had a great love in Rirea. She was human. He wanted to marry her, but a human queen would never have been accepted.”

His mother with King Thalanil? That sounded absurd and yet…

No, I can’t believe it!

“Does King Thalanil have a brother?” Finn asked carefully.

She shook her head. “He is an only child.”

Finn’s heart fell despite his rejection of being related to Thalanil already. Marikoth had been clear that he had a brother. If Thalanil had no brother then--

“Though… I take that back. He *did* have an older brother, but he *died*,” she said, “under terrible circumstances, I think. No one speaks of him for some reason.”

Finn froze. He thought he knew why no one spoke of him. Marikoth was insane and evil. No one would want to claim him as their own.

Ryleth extended the journal towards Finn. “I translated what little was in the sacred texts I have about Death Mages.”

“Thank you.” He carefully took it from her and smoothed his hands over the journal’s cover. He wondered what secrets he would learn about himself in there.

“I am sorry that there is not more, but most texts about Death Mages have been destroyed,” she said.

“Why?”

“There is a prophecy about Death Mages,” she said.

“Oh?” Finn opened the journal and saw the neat, delicate hand. He was somewhat not surprised there was a prophecy, but he couldn’t imagine *he* would have some role in any prophecy. Rohan however...

“It is said that a Death Mage will destroy the Empire,” she said softly. “I think that was part of the reason for the breach between Ravespar and Aeturnal. But I do not know the whole of it.”

Finn froze. "*Destroy*--"

"Destruction is not always bad," she said quickly. "Destruction can mean simply *change*. But those who like the way things are will see it as--"

"Disaster," Finn whispered. But Marikoth was not far from his mind. He was a Death Mage, and he would love to destroy everything for everyone. "Have you heard of any other Death Mages?"

"Active now? No. Why?"

"No reason. I was just thinking that it would be interesting to speak to one," Finn lied.

"You and Rohan should truly read what I translated together," Ryleth said as she got up and brushed her hands over her knees. "It is one of those great love stories between a Death Mage and a member of House Aeturnal. History does not exactly repeat, but it does rhyme. It might help you both."

Finn frowned. "How would it help me?"

She stood straight and tall and looked at him out of clear eyes. "It cannot be a coincidence, Finn, that a Death Mage and the heir are in love."

On the third day of traveling, the road vines started covering the roads. These vines would try to curl around horse, sicen or Fae feet. They snarled in between the spokes of cart wheels.

"Oh, by the gods, look up ahead!" Serxio pointed to the stone road ahead of them with a shaking arm.

The white stones were practically invisible under a blanket of seething vines. That green vastness continued unbroken into the unseeable distance. It would be a death trap to try and go forward.

"I will need to do more than simply cut them. That would be impossible since there are too many. I must use the power I generated against the spiders." Rohan's eyes narrowed, and he prepared to get off his horse.

But Finn caught his arm and shook his head. "No, let me handle this."

Rohan froze. "But…"

"There's no *buts*," Finn said quietly. "Even if the people will be afraid of me, it does not matter. You'll exhaust yourself, and we can't have that. Let me handle this."

"He can do it, Rohan. I've seen him do it, though… this is an awful lot, Finn," Leonid added.

Finn let out a soft laugh. "That just makes it *better*."

He got down from Sweetfire. Even though he believed he could shield her from any ill effects of his magic, he did not want to take a chance. He offered the reins to Rohan. His noble lord reached down and kissed him fiercely.

"If you need me…" Rohan let the sentence hang.

Finn wanted to tell him that he *wouldn't*. But perhaps that wasn't true.

"Stay close to me. I will feed some of the energy back to you. You can then charge Lightbringer again so that when you use it once more not all of the energy will have to come from yourself," Finn suggested.

Rohan nodded.

Finn cast one last glance back at the caravan that had halted. Ryleth was looking at him with complete trust and steadiness. Tela fussed with the reins of her sicen. She was afraid. Thomas was standing beside Ryleth's sicen. He kept rising up on his tiptoes so that he could see more of what Finn was going to do.

Finn turned back to the vine-covered road. He concentrated on the flame inside of him. The flame that needed feeding. The vegetation's life would feed it, and he would share the warmth of it with Rohan. There was a sudden weight on his right

shoulder, and he nearly gasped as he realized that the raven was perched there. It cocked its head at him.

So much life, Finn heard in that voice that was and was not his own. *Take. Take. Take.*

Finn both wanted to shoo the bird away, but also, somehow, the weight of it on his shoulder was comforting. He swallowed and turned his attention back to the road. When he was ready, Finn started to walk forward.

At first, the vines acted like a pit of vipers. They snapped at his ankles and feet, but the moment they came within an inch of touching him, their tips blackened and turned to ash. This caused them to retreat. Finn wouldn't let them simply flee from him only to come back to harm the caravan. No, he grasped hold of their life and took it for his own.

As he drew in the forest's life, his skin tingled. Step by step, the vines writhed as if in agony. They tried to get away, but he held them all with his magic. They withered, blackened and then turned to ash before being blown away by an unseen wind.

"What's he doing?" Thomas' voice rose up high and tight.

"Shhhh, Thomas!" Ryleth hissed. "Do not disturb him!"

"He's killing all the vines, but he's not touching them!" Thomas couldn't seem to stop himself from speaking. "How is he doing that?"

"He's draining the life right out of them," Tela breathed.

"*Tela*," Ryleth said her name as a warning.

Finn heard the clop of horses' hooves as Rohan, Tempest and Sweetfire followed him. There was a creaking as the caravan started up about twenty feet back from them. Finn extended his hands to the sides, and he could see those blue-white filaments streaming up from the vines and touching his fingers. Unlike with the creature in the village, he did not turn these gold, but drew them into himself. When a vine had no more filaments, it was dead.

Finn kept drawing that energy into himself. All of that life. The raven made an almost purring sound in his ear.

Yes, this is the way, it murmured. *This is right*.

All aches, pains and exhaustion fled from Finn. All doubts, insecurities and fears vanished. In this moment of bringing death, of clearing this path, he felt at *peace*. His feet hardly felt like they were touching the ground. He almost laughed. Giddiness filled him. Power filled him. A strength like he had never known.

The slow process of killing the vines suddenly became much faster as Finn realized all he needed to do was stretch out his mind and snap that energy to him. Twenty feet of vines were cleared. Then thirty. Forty. Fifty. One hundred. There were no more vines on the road, but he was *not* finished. He wanted *more*.

The overgrowth that clogged the forest was just begging to be cleared away, but he felt uncomfortably *full* of energy. He realized then that he hadn't sent any back to Rohan. He did so in that moment. He heard Rohan gasp. Finn turned to see as Lightbringer's runes lit up one at a time until the whole blade looked like it was a shard of the sun ready to burn Rohan's enemies. But it wasn't just the runes in the sword that lit up, those on Rohan's arm--*both* arms--lit up and could be seen glowing through his armor.

People let out cries of panic, but they didn't run. Ryleth looked like she had finally been proven right about something. Perhaps it had been just a theory of hers about what a Death Mage and the heir of House Aeturnal could do. In contrast, Tela was as white as a sheet. Thomas stared open-mouthed.

"He's a Death Mage," Tela whispered. "A real Death Mage."

Thomas' head jerked towards her, and something dark passed through his eyes. But Finn's attention left them as he felt the power inside of him vibrating. It wanted to get out. There wasn't any more room in Lightbringer or potentially Rohan either.

"Finn, what's wrong?" Rohan asked as he dropped out of the saddle and raced towards Finn.

Serxio and Leonid were coming towards them as well. Finn gritted his teeth. The raven *cawed*!

"I can't--I can't keep this power in me, Rohan!" Finn cried.

"Then don't!" Rohan had Finn in his arms. Clutching Finn to him. "Let it out!"

"I--"

"The forest, Finn! Aim this power towards the forest!" Rohan urged.

And Finn did just that. The power exploded out of him like it had when his mother died. The very ground erupted. The trees were unearthed then simply blasted into nothingness. The stream of energy kept going and going and... finally, it *stopped*.

Finn collapsed against Rohan's chest. He wanted to sleep. Unconsciousness was reaching towards him like a lover. But he did not fall into it until after he had seen the destruction he had wrought.

There was a wide open gash through the forest. Twenty feet wide and who knew how long. Everything in the path of Finn's magic had been utterly destroyed.

HAND OF FATE?

Aymar's white towers speared through the tops of the trees in the distance. Against the peerless blue sky their beauty was staggering. They seemed to float above a sea of green. Rohan would have stopped to simply admire the view of the summer palace, surrounded by the elegant city of white stone, but there were too many people on the road pushing the caravan inexorably forward. Slowly but surely. Unlike earlier in their trip, when the caravan had been alone, now travelers clogged the roads making it slow going.

"Keep your hood up, Serxio," Rohan reminded the foppish lord.

"I can't see though! It keeps falling into my eyes," Serxio said as he fussed with the hood.

"You don't need to see! We're going straight and none too fast," Leonid said with a grimace.

"I wish we could take them off," Finn confessed with a little laugh. "It's a fine day but too *warm* with these cloaks."

Rohan imagined Finn uncloaked riding Sweetfire in the springtime sun. He could feel the warmth of Finn's smile and envision the strands of copper in Finn's hair shining. Those green eyes would sparkle at him. But instead, all he could see was the side of a dark hood and a brief glimpse of Finn's nose. Rohan sighed.

"It's necessary," Rohan reminded them as he glanced down at his covered arms. Not only did he have his full leather armor on, but he tried to cover every part of him with the cloak's voluminous material. His "power tattoos", as he thought of them, were no longer shining through his clothes, thankfully. But he couldn't risk them doing so again with such a mixed company. "The horses are drawing attention to us already. If they were to realize that we're human…"

He didn't have to say more. Every human they saw--and there weren't many--were branded. Some were chained as they trudged alongside wagons and carts or beside their masters' sicens. Everytime Rohan glimpsed such a person his jaw clenched, and his hands tightened on Tempest's reins. Slavery was *not* right even if it had been agreed to for some ludicrous deal.

"When are we going to leave the caravan?" Leonid asked. He gestured around them. "There are no monsters here. Too many people. Too close to Aymar. It would seem you've honored your promise to Ryleth."

She and Tela were riding their sicens about fifteen feet back from them.

"I know, but the truth is… where are we to go, Leonid?" Rohan asked quietly. "If there is a way through the Wall, it will be here, near King Thalanil. And Tyreon is said to be his creature so Aymar is our destination as well. At least, for now."

"Ryleth says that she will be able to get us inside," Finn said, "even though we don't have Marks or papers."

"Being a high ranking priestess has its privileges," Serxio remarked.

“What makes you think she is high ranking? She was out in exile or so it seemed to me in that little village,” Leonid said.

“I have my ways.” Serxio suddenly pulled out a hand pie and bit into it.

“How did you get that?” Leonid demanded.

“I have my ways,” the foppish lord repeated with a secret smile as he licked the crumbs off his lips.

“You seduced someone! I know it! You can’t even speak the language, and you managed to ferret out information and food!” Leonid sounded outraged. “Give me the rest of that hand pie!”

Serxio held it out of reach. “No, it’s mine. I earned it. And as to Ryleth, the deal is that she used to be head of her order in Aymar, but her interests in certain forbidden magical history got her booted and sent to the outer end of nowhere.”

“Her interest in the heir and Death Mages?” Finn asked quietly.

Serxio spoke around the rest of the pie he crammed into his mouth, “That was the general idea.”

“So she is unlikely to betray us then,” Rohan said.

“Or she could just be waiting until we’re right at the entry point with dozens of Battle Mages around us to have us arrested,” Leonid pointed out with a frown.

“That little scupper Thomas hasn’t been about since Finn… ah… since Finn… defeated the forest,” Serxio said.

Finn’s shoulders hunched at Serxio’s attempt to downplay what he’d done. They’d had to camp right there as Finn was unable to continue on, and Rohan was determined to care for him. He’d cradled a sleeping Finn in his arms by the fire while he alternately looked out at the devastation Finn had caused and at the transcribed notes that Ryleth had provided Finn on Death Mages. There was little in the notes in terms of practical knowledge about how to control Finn’s magic or his own. It read like poetry mixed with riddles to him, all about life and death and cycles.

Ryleth came over to sit down with them. She made a move to touch Finn’s forehead but asked him with a look for permission. He nodded. She placed an ebony hand over Finn’s forehead and closed her eyes. She hummed to herself. She was smiling faintly when she opened her eyes again and took her hand away.

“He’s going to be fine. More than fine, I think,” she said with an approving nod. “Just a good night’s sleep will restore him.” At that moment, he shifted, and one of his tattoos glowed. She stared at it with a little awe. “I heard that the members of House Aeturnal had ways to store magic in themselves, but I assumed it was something that they did to themselves, not that it was so natural. Unless you’ve been hiding knowledge from me about this.”

He shook his head. “No, this is a shock for me. My uncle has always been interested in Fae magic and seemed to have some understanding of it, but I thought it was more… an intellectual exercise. Now I wonder…”

“You think he has magic too? It would seem likely,” she said.

“Yes, it would.”

Uncle Hugues’ research now was placed in another light entirely. Did his uncle know about their Aeturnal blood? Did he have any of the same powers that Rohan had? And if Hugues had known all this and not shared it with Rohan… What did that mean? On the one hand, Rohan wanted his uncle to have knowledge so that he could pass on so that Rohan didn’t feel like he was groping around in the dark. On the other hand, if Hugues did have this knowledge then he had lied by omission for years and years. How could Rohan ever trust him again?

“I spoke to Finn last evening about your powers. Both of your powers,” Ryleth said carefully. “I know you intend to return home, if you can. And home is… Rirea, yes?”

He thought of lying to her but then thought better about it. “Yes. It is. We accidentally came here due to Tyreon. We think he is our best bet yet as he seems to be able to open the Wall.”

“The King of Wolves. Well, if you’ll find him anywhere it will be at Aymar,” she said and drew her knees to her chest as she looked at the canyon now carved through the woods. “Things are out of balance here, Rohan.”

“Not just here,” Rohan said.

She nodded. “I believe you and Finn are the ones that can change this. The Aeturnals were great balancers. They anchored life in places where it would not ordinarily thrive and culled it when there was too much. The Empire was a lot larger then, incorporating modern day Rirea and several other human kingdoms.”

“Those human kingdoms you speak of have no desire to rejoin the Empire if that’s what you’re suggesting. Considering how humans are treated by Fae, in general, it would be madness to do so,” Rohan stated. “Would your King Thalanil let us take life from here and use it in Rirea?”

Rohan had been considering this since the pool where he had made the flowers bloom after Finn had thinned them. Finn’s own experiences in mixing his magic with life to cause Tanglewood to be prosperous seemed to indicate that if the excess life could be siphoned from the Empire, it might be able to be used to reinvigorate Rirea.

“He is not an unreasonable person,” Ryleth said. “I know you have a bad view of him, but it is not accurate. One could just as easily ask if the King of Rirea would accept anything from the Empire.”

“And I can tell you that the King of Rirea would,” Rohan answered firmly. “I know him very well.”

“But we are not them. Right now, the possibilities you two represent are not known beyond us here.” Ryleth extended her arms to encompass the caravan. “People have been known to react badly to such power.”

Rohan thought of the suspicious looks and the whispers that had stopped whenever he had come near since Finn had shown his magic. “Death Mage” and “kill us all” and “prophecy” and “traitor” and “end of the world” had still come to his ears. He worried about this talk especially after Finn told him about the alleged prophecy.

“Does King Thalanil believe in this Death Mage prophecy?” he asked her.

Ryleth would not meet his eyes. “I do not know. I am not his personal confidant--”

“He does,” Rohan guessed.

She grimaced. “There might have been a command that was issued from the Ravenspars about destroying all manuscripts and knowledge about Death Mages and their magic. But that command was issued long ago and not by King Thalanil.”

Rohan blinked at her. “So… you having even a few pages about Death Mages is in violation of that command?”

Another grimace. “Knowledge should never be destroyed. Ignorance is not safety. It is dangerous.”

“If the knowledge that Finn were a Death Mage was to get to certain people in your own religious order, what would happen?” he pressed.

“Some are superstitious!” She shook her head. “Surely you know humans that are reactionary and foolish! But that does not mean there are not brave and

intelligent people who will listen to logic and reason. What you and Finn can do supports my theory about Death Magic being an integral part of the ecosystem! That without it we are all doomed to suffer! And that the elimination of Death Mages--"

"Wait! *Elimination?!* Do you mean they kill Death Mages here?" Rohan stared at her in shock.

She nodded. "That has been the rumor. There have been members of House Ravenspar who have died as infants, many more not even acknowledged at all, is the rumor. They are killed at birth and never spoken of. I thought under the last king and queen that things would be different, but then the queen died, and King Thalanil's father became a recluse."

"But Finn is alive. And you told him that all Death Mages are born of House Ravenspar," Rohan pointed out.

Finn had confessed what Ryleth had told him about how his father might be a Ravenspar the night before.

"My mother never said though! Wouldn't she have told me if my father was a--a *king*? That sounds mad just saying it." Finn had hung his head. "I'm a servant. I don't even have my own room!"

"Even if you were *just a servant* you would not deserve to be treated as you are by your family," Rohan had told him, framing his face with his hands and forcing Finn to look at him. "I could not get by without the people who *serve* me. My job is to serve them back. And your family has not done that. But, regardless, I do not think it mad to believe you the son of a king. There is something about you, Finn, that is special. Different. I saw it from the first."

"If I'm anyone's child, I'm likely Marikoth's!" Finn shivered.

"Even if that were true, there have been plenty of children who are not like their parents for good or bad. You are your own person, Finn. Your strength comes from within you," Rohan said.

Now, as he looked at Ryleth, he wondered if Finn *was* related to King Thalanil. If he was… that made things both more complicated and simpler at the same time.

"I do not know how Finn survived when others have not. I can guess. So can you. He was born to a human woman. He was born after the Wall rose up. Perhaps his father did not know he was even conceived," Ryleth shrugged.

"Other than King Thalanil and his father, there are other members of House Ravenspar who could be Finn's father, are there not?" Rohan asked.

"Yes, but that main line is the one that has always seemingly bore the Death Mages," she answered.

"So, you really believe that Finn may be the son of your king?"

"If he is then that makes it all the more possible that something might be accomplished in regards to the imbalance," she insisted.

"Or not." Rohan leaned back and stared into the fire. "You should have told us before Finn demonstrated his power. Now all of these people know, and not all of them are trustworthy, Ryleth."

"I can protect you. I will protect you," Ryleth said with a determined glint in her eye.

"You've said that the Ravenspars have killed their own children for being Death Mages. Why wouldn't they kill Finn?" And that thought had him wanting to vomit just saying it.

"Because we will be able to show what you can do together. The draining of the land and the imbuing of the power into the power stones, magical objects or even back into the earth itself," she said. "Your abilities to solve the problems before us

will overcome superstitious fears of a prophecy that is so vague as to mean nothing."

"I cannot risk Finn in the hope that *logic* will prevail, Ryleth," Rohan told her.

"You have no way back to Rirea right now," she pointed out. "You should come with me to see the head of my order. He is a wise Fae and understands the need for balance. Once he sees what you and Finn can do--"

"Ryleth, we are not putting ourselves into the hands of some religious official in the hopes that he won't betray us to your king! You, yourself, were willing to hand me over to King Thalanil for execution," he reminded her. "You've changed your mind--"

"I thought you were just a human with a sword! Don't you understand? I didn't realize who and what--"

"You should have helped me whether or not you knew!" he cried, and Finn stirred restlessly.

He soothed the young man back into full sleep. His fingers went to the new white wing of hair that had appeared at Finn's right temple after he had used his magic. Would Finn's hair go this silvery white all over if he kept using it?

She shook her head and spoke more quietly, "Are we going to go over this ground again, Rohan? I cannot undo the past. Neither can you. We can only go forward."

He grimaced and nodded. "You are right on that. Let me think about this"

She gracefully got to her feet. "That is all I ask for. Your consideration." Her gaze swept back to the scar. "Such power. Imagine the good it could do instead of destruction."

Now they were nearly at Aymar and he had to make his decision. In an inner pocket, he had written a letter from himself to Thalanil, asking to meet. His one thought was to give Ryleth this letter to deliver to the Fae king while he, Finn, Serxio and Leonid found a way through the Wall. He didn't want to negotiate with the Fae ruler on *this* side of the structure. They were trespassers and interlopers here, even though they had never intended to be. When they were back home, they would be on firmer ground, and maybe something good could come of this.

He had never expected to want anything but war with Thalanil. The Fae king had supposedly killed his parents in cold blood. But the very fact that he now used the word "supposedly" before that showed that he was no longer certain of what had happened. His uncle's secrets and the state of the Empire were causing him to question everything he thought he knew. It was incredible that he and Finn should meet as they had or at all. They needed one another to use their gifts to their highest forms. There had to be the hand of fate in there somewhere.

"Ryleth, I'm going to take Thomas and ride ahead," Tela said. "Perhaps we will be able to skip the wait at the gates if I can reach some of our brethren inside."

"Yes, do that, Tela. I would like to be inside the city tonight, but at the rate we are going we may still be just a few feet forward," Ryleth answered her.

"We will return," Tela said.

Then she and Thomas--he was riding behind her so as not to slow her down--passed by them. Thomas shot them a last glance, and Rohan thought he caught a smirk on the human's face. But that could have been caused by the thought that he finally did not have to walk or that he was going to be inside of Aymar before everyone else. It didn't have to mean anything else.

"I'm going to look for Emma. I'm really worried about her. And I want to see her before we leave," Serxio said.

"All right," Rohan said.

“We’ll be right here,” Leonid answered grimly.

“We might go a few feet,” Finn said with a laugh.

“If only,” Leonid groused.

Serxio wheeled his horse around and rode along the edge of the forest towards the back of the caravan. Most of the humans were walking just behind the wagons full of the villagers’ belongings.

“If we get into Aymar, where do you suppose we look for our fluffy wolf?” Leonid asked.

“Wouldn’t he go to the king?” Finn pointed out.

“He might,” Rohan agreed with a twist of his lips.

“Then we’re going to try and get into the palace itself?” Leonid let out a strangled laugh. “Sounds like a plan! A plan to commit suicide, but a plan!”

“I think… I think I might be able to sense Tyreon’s life force,” Finn said quietly with a furrowed brow. “I can tell the difference between human and Fae, even between different animals. I *know* the feel of Tyreon, so perhaps if we’re close enough to him, I’ll be able to locate him--what’s that? That sounds like Serxio! Something’s wrong!”

Indeed, Serxio was shouting Rohan’s name and waving an arm frantically. He was by one of the middle wagons that was filled to the brim with keepsakes and valuables.

“What’s wrong with our feathered friend?” Leonid asked.

“Let’s find out!” Rohan said and turned Tempest around.

“What is going on with Serxio?” Ryleth asked as she and Jacona joined them as they made their way to the back of the caravan.

“He was looking for Emma,” Rohan said with a frown as Thomas’ smirking face flashed before his mind’s eye.

They finally made their way to Serxio who had left his horse and went inside one of the covered wagons, out of sight, once he saw that they were coming. Rohan looked to see inside and found Serxio tossing furniture off of a prone body. He reached for her and cradled her body in his arms.

“She’s been stabbed and stuffed in here like garbage so no one would find her!” Serxio cried. “Oh, by the gods! Hang on!”

“Emma,” Finn gasped. “She’s…”

“Is she dead?” Leonid asked.

Finn didn’t have a chance to answer as Emma got out in the weakest breath, “N-no h-honor.”

And then she was gone. Rohan felt her life pass out of reach.

“Finn, can you help her? Can you bring her back?” There were tears running down Serxio’s cheeks as he unabashedly wept for this woman.

“I’m so sorry, Serxio, but… she is gone,” Finn told him and put a hand on Serxio’s back in sympathy.

“Who did this? Who would do this?” Ryleth asked with anger causing her red eyes to blaze.

Rohan knew. Emma had told them with her literal final breath. “Thomas.”

WOLF AND RAVEN

"How do you know that Thomas did this? Why would he?" Ryleth asked angrily.

"Because Emma said that same thing when Thomas betrayed us last time! She didn't trust him and was watching and listening to what he was doing to keep us safe!" Serxio snarled. "And she found out something that he couldn't let her tell us!"

"What could he do? He…" But then Ryleth's eyes grew distant. "Tela… Tela hates Thomas yet she took him with her to Aymar. Why? What would cause her to do that unless..."

"They mean to betray us," Rohan said, and his lips writhed back from his teeth. "They'll tell someone about me and Finn. Tela has been terrified of Finn from the beginning, and Thomas wants a way out of here. Reporting on us would do that."

"Yes," Ryleth said, still distracted. "They will do this, and all will be lost." She shook her head. "We must catch up with them!"

"Don't ask me to stay behind, Rohan!" Finn cried.

"Nor me!" Serxio scrambled out of the wagon after tenderly covering Emma with a blanket.

"We all go!" Rohan cried.

Because we may all need to run together, he thought.

The five of them thundered down the side of the road. Jacona, despite her lumbering size, kept up with the horses, sometimes even surging ahead.

"OUT OF THE WAY!" Rohan shouted.

Ryleth sent a burst of harmless magic ahead of them that startled stragglers to jump to the side so that they had a clear path.

"Do you see them?! Because I don't!" Leonid cried.

"No! Not yet!" Rohan shouted.

"They can't have gotten in yet!" Ryleth said, but she dug her heels into Jacona's sides, and the sicen added yet more speed.

"We have to stop them! Thomas must pay for what he did!" Serxio growled.

Finn could not speak at all as they neared Aymar. Something inside of him *recognized* this place. He felt a connection to it. To every stone. To every tower. He knew its life. There was someone inside of it. Not something. *Someone.* They felt so familiar to him.

Father… no! It can't be! It can't! Finn cursed himself. *Focus on finding Thomas and Tela! Not him… not King Thalanil Ravenspar.*

It was then that the raven, who had been absent since he had carved a canyon through the forest, appeared before him *cawing* raucously and soaring ahead. His heart lodged in his throat, and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He was supposed to come here. This was meant to be. He leaned forward over Sweetfire's

neck as the mare galloped toward the summer palace of the Fae king.

The entrance to Aymar was at the end of a white stone bridge which spanned a crystal-clear lake. People, their animals and belongings clogged their way forward, but it wasn't just them that were stymied by the crowd.

"THERE!" Finn shouted. "They're just going through the gate!"

He had caught sight of Thomas' back as he and Tela rode inside of Aymar. Thomas' face was a white blob, but Finn could see the fear. Thomas had seen them too and must have known that Emma's body had been discovered.

"They know we're on their trail!" Finn cried.

"Move! MOVE!" Ryleth shouted in the Fae language, but Finn understood her from the context if not the words. But it seemed the other people did not or they simply didn't seem to want to comply. There were some angry looks at her and clenched fists. Ryleth's eyes narrowed. "Fine. You don't wish to move, I will make you."

Ryleth didn't bother to send harmless balls of light towards the people in warning. She simply *moved* the people to the side as if parting the seas. People cried out in shock and fear, but she was unrepentant.

"Come on!" she called to them as she and Jacona charged forward. "We have to catch them!"

They thundered over the white stone bridge. The raven soared ahead of them. With every hoofbeat, Finn felt like he was drawing closer to his destiny. There were impressive Battle Mages at the gate wearing black and red armor with a red raven splashed across their chests. These were the Battle Mages for King Thalanil himself, Finn guessed Lightning crackled over their armor. Fire coated their blades. Acid spheres were ready to be launched from their armored fingers.

"Escaped murderers!" Ryleth shouted in explanation. "We're in pursuit!"

She held up her palm and a glowing purple rune appeared in the air in front of her. Whatever it meant, the Battle Mages, amazingly, stepped down and let them pass. Finn and Rohan shared a look. Serxio must have heard correctly. Ryleth must be something more than a simple priestess of a small village. Her knowledge of Death Mages and her abilities to withstand a dozen Battle Mages on her own should have alerted them to that.

We all have secrets, it seems, Finn thought uneasily.

Then, he was through the yawning gates of Aymar and on one of the curving white stone roads that appeared to wind around the outside edge of the city. From what Finn could see, the city was laid out like a wheel with roads as spokes all leading to the Palace of Aymar at the very center.

Unlike the villages they had encountered, Aymar was made completely of stone, carved out of the very mountain and polished to a high shine. Every building from the lowliest tavern to the palace itself was elegant and opulent with carvings and giltwork. The streets overflowed with people buying and selling exotic goods. There were vendors of staffs, who showed their potential purchasers the magic they could wield at their very fingertips. Bursts of flame and ice erupted from their stalls. There were people selling cloaks that when the stall owner placed them around their shoulders and both purchaser and cloak became invisible. There were vendors selling smoking, glowing and bubbling elixirs. And so much more.

The sound of bartering and people simply laughing and chatting was deafening. When Finn realized that Rohan and the others were going one way and the raven was going another, his shout didn't reach them. He pulled back on Sweetfire's reins. The horse danced beneath him, wanting to follow Tempest. He wanted to as well, and yet he stayed where he was. He saw that Thomas and Tela were turning a

corner with Ryleth and the others in hot pursuit so why was the raven not going that way?

The bird was hovering above a certain point in the street ahead that would lead eventually to the palace. The crowd of people were moving around that spot, avoiding it. Finn urged Sweetfire forward. She neighed but did as he directed as always. The crowd parted fully, and in a beam of golden sunlight sat Tyreon, King of Wolves. He was in the middle of the road, tongue lolling out, panting, and seemed to be waiting for Finn.

Finn's head jerked back towards where Rohan and the others had gone, but they were now out of sight. He couldn't alert them to Tyreon's presence. Besides they had to go after Thomas and Tela. But someone had to go after Tyreon, too. And that someone was him. He would get Tyreon and join up with them. He would know Rohan's life signature anywhere and could find him. Finn turned back towards the wolf only to see Tyreon's fluffy tail receding in the distance, waving like a flag.

You've got to be kidding!

CAW!

The raven gave him a look that said if he didn't follow he was a damned fool.

Finn dug his heels into Sweetfire's sides, and she started trotting up the street after the raven and the wolf. People moved out of their way easily. It seemed as if there was always a clear path between him and the wolf, but no matter how fast he urged Sweetfire to go, the horse stubbornly stuck to a trot. There were too many people. Too much noise. Too many new smells and experiences for his country-born-and-bred mare. The largest city she had been in was Dawnmore, and even then, they had stayed away from the busy city center. Here, she was overwhelmed.

The raven swooped to the left, leading them down a less busy and narrower street. Then the bird swooped to the right into yet a smaller street. They threaded their way through various back alleys and streets so tiny that his boots nearly scraped the walls. But no matter what he did, they couldn't cut down the distance between him and Tyreon. He could have used his magic to drain the wolf and keep him still, but that felt utterly wrong to him. Tyreon would occasionally look back at him and wag that fluffy tail. His tongue lolled out in delight as if they were playing a game. No, he would not harm this beautiful creature.

Where are you taking me, Tyreon?

That was answered when they came to a sheer wall with a small, wooden door. It was one of the outer walls of the palace. Finn was sure there was a spectacular main entrance somewhere, but this looked to be a servant's entrance. It would, undoubtedly, be locked and barred, and Finn could see the energy from magic protecting it. Yet, as the white wolf approached, the door opened of its own accord. Beyond it was a sunlit stairwell leading upwards. There were flowers cascading down the sides of the walls. Tyreon mounted the steps and cast one of those tongue-lolling, happy, come chase me looks.

"Tyreon! Stop!" Finn begged, but the wolf kept going.

Finn had to dismount from Sweetfire. The door was too small for her, and the steps would have been a challenge in any case. There was nowhere to tie her reins, so he went and grasped her snout and looked meaningfully into her eyes. If there was ever a time he needed his belief that he could communicate with animals to be true, it was *now*.

"Stay here, Sweetfire. Please," he begged before kissing her nose.

He spun around and raced through the doorway. The raven was waiting for him at the top of the stairwell. He took the stairs two at a time until he reached the bird. He had to shield his eyes for a moment as the sunlight had turned the air to liquid

gold, and he was blinded. Slowly, his vision returned to normal, and he realized he was in the corner of a massive garden. He let out a breath of awe as he looked around him at the explosion of blooms. Flowers of every type and color rioted throughout the space, and yet there was a sense of order here even with the wildness. This was life controlled *perfectly*.

And he had never seen anything so beautiful.

Finn moved among the flower beds on the white stone paths as if in a dream. The flowers perfumed the air with their myriad scents. It was intoxicating but not overwhelming. Finn's hands drifted over the tops of the flowers, feeling their silky blooms brush his palms, leaving yellow trails of pollen on his skin.

He knew that he should be looking for Tyreon, but he couldn't help but drift through this magical, almost fairytale space. He imagined walking here, arm in arm, with Rohan. He could envision them having a picnic under the gracious trees. He would feed Rohan berries, and the noble lord would lick his fingers clean of their juice. He imagined nights with Rohan, lying out here on soft blankets, arms around one another, looking at the stars and talking of everything and nothing.

Peace. Gods, this place is the epitome of peace and comfort and joy, Finn thought.

He would have drifted forever, caught in his imaginings, but thankfully, his eyes caught sight of another set of stairs that went up into what looked like another, more magnificent garden above him. At the top of these next set of steps, he saw the end of Tyreon's tail disappearing. The raven soared ahead. Finn followed after.

When he reached the top, he had not been wrong that another garden was there. There were trees whose branches groaned with ripe fruit. There were bushes of berries that looked ready to pick and devour, leaving stained fingers and lips in their wake. His stomach rumbled at the thought pies made with this fruit. Pies and cakes and sweet crumbles. It was such a bounty as to overwhelm. There were also more flowers and sculpted hedges and the sound of a waterfall in the distance. It was, again, so peaceful. He felt as if he could truly breathe for the first time in his life.

This is how things should be, Finn thought. *Rohan would love it here.*

There were the huge, glowing mushrooms, too, but these were all white or silver instead of the blue and green he'd seen outside. He imagined at night that they would glow like earthbound starlight and moonlight even if the sky was covered by clouds. Padded loungers covered in pillows and blankets were placed strategically around the garden to give the best views of the city, mountain and forest beyond. From here, one could not see how overgrown and dangerous the forest had become. It simply looked like a sea of green.

In the very center of this high garden there was a circular fire pit. It was lined with those same white stones and crowned with a well-used grill where meats and vegetables could be cooked or a simple fire could be enjoyed in the colder temperatures. More comfortable seating was all around it. One could stretch out with a fire going and admire the stars here, too, even when frost filled the air. He could almost feel Rohan's arms around him.

It was there that Tyreon waited for him. Sitting on the stone pavers just before the fire pit, tail swishing the stone clean of flower petals, the wolf regarded him out of laughing eyes. The raven took off and disappeared. This was where Finn was supposed to be.

"Tyreon! You bad wolf! You've given me a merry chase! I had to leave Sweetfire on her own, and she's scared as it is," Finn chastised the wolf, even though he likely should have been making soft, encouraging sounds to make sure that Tyreon didn't run away again.

But the wolf was unrepentant for the chase and just let his tongue loll out again with his happy pants. Finn closed the distance between them and dropped to his haunches before the wolf. Tyreon cocked his massive head at Finn. Slowly and carefully, Finn reached out and petted the King of Wolves' ruff. Tyreon made a happy sound, and Finn reached out with his other hand to pet the big baby all over. Soon he was burying his face in Tyreon's soft fur, and the wolf was licking his face, his hands, anything he could reach.

"Hey, hey! Stop that! Yuck, wolf breath!" Finn laughed as Tyreon gave him another lick on the cheek.

That was when he heard the soft step on the stone near him. Finn's head jerked up. A Fae stood not five feet from him. He was tall, lithe and dressed in crimson silk robes that went well with his jet black hair and the simple silver circlet that sat on his brow. Red eyes, same as the color as his robes, were fixed upon Finn. All the saliva left Finn's mouth, and his heart was once more lodged in his throat as if trying to escape his body.

He *knew* this Fae.

He had *dreamed* of him and Tyreon.

This was King Thalanil Ravenspar.

At first, Thalanil spoke in that liquid, musical language of the Fae. When Finn shook his head to indicate he didn't understand, Thalanil stated in perfect Common, "So *you* are the thief of life."

CAPTURE

Their horses' hooves thundered over Aymar's stone streets. Rohan leaned over Tempest's neck as the powerful stallion charged forward. People jumped and rolled out of their way. The road curved, and Tela and Thomas had disappeared beyond it, but when they came around the corner the two murderers were not thirty feet from them.

Ryleth sent two electrical charges after them. Just before the first hit Thomas' back, the charges opened into what looked like nets. The first struck Thomas and sent him toppling from the back of the sicen. He was pinned to the ground by the net after. He moaned and went still. The second charge nearly hit Tela, but she turned at the last moment and stretched out her left hand. Something shot out from her fingertips, and it sent the charged net spinning away.

But Ryleth had already sent another magical bolt towards her. This one was green like acid and slammed into her side and back. She was sent flying from the sicen and rolled end over end on the stone street before coming to a stop. She lay there, unmoving, and Rohan wondered if she was dead or just unconscious.

Rohan pulled back on Tempest's reins. The big warhorse reared back but then settled. Serxio and Leonid brought their horses to a stop by him. It was then that he noticed Finn was not with them. His head shot around to look back at where they had come, but Finn was nowhere in sight.

"Finn! Did either of you see him? Wasn't he with us?" Rohan demanded.

Serxio and Leonid looked around just as frantically for the young man.

"He was just behind me through the gate," Serxio said. "I don't understand--"

"We must get these two off of the street!" Ryleth demanded. "We will deal with Finn's absence after we deal with them. Finn is hardly helpless."

"But someone may have captured him!" Rohan cried.

"Someone may capture *us* if we don't deal with this and then we can do nothing for him," Ryleth pointed out. "Let's get these two out of here and then… *no*, oh, *no*."

Ryleth's gaze had slid down the street. Rohan glanced at where she was staring and saw a group of six Fae dressed in those familiar purple and gold robes of the priesthood. Ryleth grimaced as she straightened up and then plastered a smile on her face. Those few people in the street that had not run off when Ryleth had used magic now fled from this new group, leaving them alone to face the members of Ryleth's religious order.

"Whatever you do, stay silent. Just go with whatever I say," she murmured at them. "And keep those hoods up." She then addressed the woman at the head of the group. "Lyari! How pleasant to see you!"

Lyari looked to be in her forties or would have if she was a human. Her skin was a golden-yellow color. She had almond-shaped, red eyes and a delicate,

porcelain doll appearance. Her red hair was shorn at the sides and then plaited into an elaborate, long braid, longer than Ryleth's. She regarded the scene before her with a sort of cool disinterest.

"Is that your apprentice on the ground, Ryleth?" Lyari asked.

"Yes," Ryleth answered without going into any further detail.

Lyari nodded slightly. "And one of your human slaves, too! Goodness, this must be a story."

"No, not really. Quite ordinary," Ryleth stated as her hands made a complicated motion that turned the net that pinned Thomas to the ground into a set of manacles for his wrists and ankles. "Slaves, pick him up and put him across one of your saddles."

She had pointed at Leonid and Serxio who slid off their horses and went to Thomas' side. Leonid grabbed Thomas' shoulders while Serxio took his feet. The two of them kept their hoods up as they lifted Thomas from the street.

Thomas' senses must have come back to him because he shouted out, "Death Mage!"

Leonid slapped a hand over Thomas' lips to stop anything else coming out. That made it harder for them to shuffle Thomas over to one of the saddles, but they kept moving.

"Death Mage? What an odd thing for him to say? Or have you been continuing your illegal studies into them, Ryleth?" Lyari's expression was friendly, but her eyes were sharp.

"He is just trying to cause trouble. He's a slave. That's what they do," Ryleth said casually as she gestured to Thomas, and a magical bond appeared over his lips.

"I would hope there was nothing to it. Considering how much it cost you last time," Lyari said with a cat-like smile.

"Exactly, I would be a fool to continue," Ryleth answered. "And I am not a fool."

"Yet here you are chasing down your own apprentice and a slave who shouts *Death Mage*. It's all very peculiar," Lyari said.

"There's nothing to concern you here, Lyari," Ryleth said as she gestured for Serxio and Leonid to hurry things up with Thomas.

They grunted and loaded Thomas, face down, onto Leonid's saddle. The two of them looked at Tela. Ryleth nodded to indicate they should load her up, too.

"I would agree with you normally. I hardly need concern myself with apprentices and runaway slaves," Lyari said. "But… I wasn't making my way to the gate by accident. I was made aware of your arrival."

Ryleth froze. "Indeed? I cannot imagine why you wanted to see me."

"Really? I suppose if Samron hadn't contacted me that would be true," Lyari said with another cat-like smile. "He thought better about keeping silent about the heir. But a Death Mage is new. I hadn't heard you were harboring one of them."

Rohan's hand dropped to the hilt of Lightbringer. He felt the heat of his power tattoos as they began to glow as he prepared to use the sword and his powers to protect them. Ryleth gave him a desperate look that said, "Do not do this! Not yet! Let me try to fix it!" He grimaced but gave an almost imperceptible nod. But this made him terrified about where Finn was. Had the young man been captured by these people? But who could truly contain him? His powers were extreme. Yet, Finn had a good heart and he wouldn't have wanted to drain people.

"What did Samron tell you?" Ryleth asked lightly as if she were not concerned. "He has such an imagination!"

“Enough.” Lyari smirked. “Though… he has gone silent since then. I cannot seem to reach him. But I’m sure he will be willing to tell me and the *king* everything about you harboring the alleged heir *and* a Death Mage.”

Rohan’s teeth gritted. He wanted to speak, but still Ryleth’s silent begging kept him silent.

“If Samron is not answering you, it is because he *cannot*. He is likely dead along with all his people,” Ryleth stated flatly.

There were murmurs among the Fae priests and priestesses behind Lyari. For her part, Lyari’s eyes narrowed.

“That’s absurd. He has dozens of Battle Mages and his wall to protect him,,” Lyari scoffed.

“It’s not enough. Not any longer. You wouldn’t know how bad it is because you never leave Aymar,” Ryleth said tightly. “The overgrowth, and the monsters it creates, have become ungovernable. There are not enough Battle Mages or walls to protect us. That’s why I’m here. I need to speak to King Thalanil and explain--”

“Oh, you will speak to the king!” Lyari snarled, clearly angry by Ryleth’s criticism. “He’ll be very interested in your companions here! I’m sure he’ll want to interview them personally and--”

Rohan drew out Lightbringer. It rang as it exited its sheath. The runes upon its blade burned like the sun. The tattoos on his arms glowed through his armor. He pointed the blade at Lyari who had stopped in mid-sentence and was staring at him open-mouthed.

“I am the heir of House Aeturnal,” the words came easily to Rohan’s lips in Fae. His sword arm did not tremble. “You will not impede us. Stand down and I will spare you. Stand in my way and I will destroy you.”

The Fae priests and priestesses let out gasps and cries. They shrank away from him. Lyari gaped. Serxio and Leonid would tell him later that he seemed to grow in the saddle and that a glow surrounded his entire form. His voice reverberated even though it shouldn’t have. He hardly sounded like himself at all but like a god on high speaking to his subjects. Tempest reared back and when his hooves struck the stones there were golden sparks. The sound was deafening.

When the first priest fled it was as if there was a crack in a dam, and everyone else followed like water running away. Lyari was the last to leave. She remained for long moments, looking terrified and angry at the same time.

“What have you done, Ryleth?” Lyari hissed finally before turning and following after her brethren.

When she was out of sight, Ryleth spun around towards him. “How could you be so foolish, Rohan?!”

“Hey, he saved us from imprisonment and death! You were losing that battle there!” Leonid shouted loyally.

“So what if she took us to King Thalanil?! You could have shown him what you and Finn can do! You could have shown him that you are here to help not harm!” She shook her head violently. “Now you’ve just challenged him!”

“I didn’t challenge him. I was challenging her, your nemesis there,” Rohan said, but even as he said it, he knew she was right. His actions could easily be construed as a challenge against Thalanil, which was the last thing he wanted.

“The king will only see it as an act of violence by the heir against his people!” She pinched the top of her nose. “We need to get out of here. Now! They will get the king’s Battle Mages and not even you can overcome the thousands in this city, Rohan! This has ruined everything!”

“I could never have gone before the king, Ryleth! If she took me there it would have been all over anyways!” Rohan snapped. “At all costs, we must not be captured!”

“Why?” she asked.

He closed his eyes tightly for a moment. He had to trust her. He had to make her understand. “Because I am not just the heir to House Aeturnal. I have my own kingdom.” He pointed in the direction of the Wall. “I am the King of Rirea.”

She gaped at him before covering her face with her hands. “Oh, gods, no, this is--”

“Not something we should discuss here and now,” Serxio urged. “You were right before that we need to get out of here Ryleth. Let’s make haste! I really don’t want to lose my head.”

Serxio and Leonid grabbed Tela and slung her over Serxio’s saddle before swinging themselves up on their horses.

“We have to find Finn,” Rohan stated grimly. “I’m not going anywhere without him.”

“How? He could be anywhere in the city!” Ryleth cried.

“Our horses are pretty distinctive. People would have noticed him going by,” Leonid said.

But Rohan’s gaze was fixed on a very strange raven who sat on a nearby lintel. It turned an intelligent eye towards him and *cawed*! Finn had described just such a creature, but Rohan had never seen it before. Until now.

Rohan gave a hard smile. “I think we may have a guide.”

LONG LOST

Finn slowly rose up from his haunches. He did not want to cause the magic that swirled invisibly around King Thalanil Ravenspar to be used against him. At least, not yet. He wasn't ready, but part of him longed for it. To drink it down like cold, clean water. But there was so much of it, and he had seen what had happened when he'd drunk too much of the forest's life. Rohan was not here to help him expend it. Also, there was no convenient place to discharge it here. For all he knew, if he let it out, the second canyon he created would cut through the city.

"I did not mean to steal from you," Finn said softly. "My family's estate was dying. There wasn't enough life in Rirea to make it bloom again. So, I took a little. I did not hurt anyone."

King Thalanil stared at him, unblinking for long moments. "You are a Death Mage. You cannot help but hurt people."

"That's not true! I--I've only ever taken from nature and once… only once from someone who tried to hurt me. But I had no choice!" Finn cried as he thought of Marikoth's spittle flecked lips and raving countenance.

He compared the features of the Fae before him to Marikoth. There were definite similarities there, something about the jaw and the cheekbones. But where Marikoth had been bleached of color, Thalanil was brilliant with it. He had beautiful long, black hair the color of a raven's wing. His skin tone was golden and healthy. His lips were full and almost sensual compared to the thin-lipped Marikoth's. He held himself with grace and strength while Marikoth had moved well but with a sharpness that Thalanil didn't have.

They're definitely brothers though, but Marikoth has been pared down to the bone while Thalanil flourishes.

"We always have a choice," Thalanil intoned, brooking no argument. "And it had to be more than *one* person you've drained. Your mother would have been your first kill."

Finn jerked as if slapped. "What?! NO! I would never--"

"That is how a Death Mage comes into their power. For a Death Mage to live, the one that brought them into the world must die," Thalanil said with a conviction that made Finn believe him.

"No," Finn breathed, horrified. "My mother died of a--a wasting *disease*! Not me! I couldn't have…"

But even as he said it, he realized that his powers--draining her life--would look like a wasting disease. He thought of how his powers had exploded out of him after her death.

After her death, he repeated to himself.

His memory then conjured up moments with her where she'd had him sit at the edge of her bed and she'd held his hand. She had smiled up at him even though it had taken almost all the energy she'd had.

"Finn, no matter what happens to me, I want you to know that it was all worth it," she'd said, her voice reedy and hoarse. "You have been my greatest adventure."

"Momma," Finn had moaned, "don't leave me. Don't go."

Even then, he'd understood that his mother's soul was slowly bleeding away from this world and going to another, a place where the living could not follow.

"I'll never truly be gone, Finn. I'm with you. Here." She touched the center of his chest. "And here." She touched his right temple. "Always."

"But--but I want you *here*." He squeezed her hand.

"This life is but a dream, my son. A dream that when we wake, there is another more brilliant world beyond it," she told him.

"Take me with you!" he pleaded.

She squeezed her eyelids shut and tears fell. "No, my darling. You are needed here. Don't ask me for what. Don't ask me how. It is just something I *know*. I've always known. And that is why I regret *nothing*."

Finn's legs gave out from underneath him, and he sank to the ground as he realized the truth of it. His mother had known that he was killing her. His simple existence was killing her and yet… she'd been happy. She hadn't regretted it, but he did. Oh, by the gods, he did, because someone like that shouldn't die when someone like Thomas was allowed to live.

Tyreon whined and nuzzled him, but he could barely move, let alone comfort the wolf. Thalanil stared down at him with almost pity in those crimson eyes.

"You did not know," Thalanil stated rather than asked.

Finn shook his head and then curled over Tyreon's back as tears flowed down his face. He had killed his mother! It didn't matter that he hadn't meant to or didn't even know he'd done it. He knew now. He was responsible. He had taken his beloved mother from this world! Whether she'd wanted to go or not, it wasn't right!

"It is strange that Tyreon is so gentle with you. I sent him to hunt down and bring the thief to me. Normally, he presents them to me as prey, but he treats you as if… you are precious," Thalanil's voice did not sound as cold and certain as before. It was almost as if he regretted his words.

Why should he? I killed my mother! My mother! He was just telling me the truth about what I am.

Anything good he had thought about his power suddenly fled. He was like Marikoth. He would become evil and mad if he wasn't already on his way. His mother! How?

"I do not understand how you exist. Only my House produces Death Mages. My brother can have no children. My father is a recluse. He sees no one. Not even me so… who are you? How could you exist? A distant relative's child? No, not possible," Thalanil breathed.

He sounded closer. But Finn couldn't bring it into himself to care. Rohan could not love someone who had killed his mother. He could only imagine the looks of horror and disgust that would be on Serxio and Leonid's faces when they found out he had committed matricide. No, it was better that it end here for him!

The others would be safer without him. No magic like his could ever be any good. Ryleth was wrong about that. So, he did not move when Thalanil pulled back his hood and then lifted his tear-stained face so that he could see Finn fully.

The expression on Thalanil's face went from curious and cold to… shock. All the color ran out of his skin. His eyes became huge. His lips parted. Grief and loss and then another emotion, something like dawning understanding spread across his beautiful features. The hand under Finn's chin began to shake.

"Your eyes… you have *her* eyes," Thalanil gasped.

"Whose?" Finn asked dully, hardly hearing the question, let alone understanding it.

"*Maeve's*," Thalanil answered.

"That's my--my mother's name," Finn got out as a fresh wave of agony went through him. "You knew her? I--I killed her. You're right. I didn't realize what I'd done. I was only five, but--"

"No! No, you--you did not!" Thalanil cried, contradicting all he had said earlier.

"But you were right. I can see it now. I--"

"It was not your fault… you didn't even know until I said…" Thalanil staggered a few feet from him and reached around him blindly as if for something to hang onto. "This is why she would not see me again."

"I don't understand. You knew my mother--"

"Knew her? She was my *life*!" Thalanil covered his face with his hands and let out a wracked laugh that sounded more like a sob.

"You loved her," Finn breathed as he felt a sense of gratefulness fill him. His mother had been loved, not deceived by Marikoth or abandoned after one night of passion. He repeated with satisfaction, "You loved her."

But Thalanil did not seem to hear him. He pulled his long black hair, causing it to tangle as he cried out, "I'm such a *fool*! Maeve, why didn't you tell me?! Why? I did not mean what I said! I did not… I would never have… done what I said! Not once I saw him! Not… not our boy..."

Finn stared up at the Fae king who now looked wild and almost unhinged with grief compared to the cold, composed being he had met not moments before. Finn hugged Tyreon, and the wolf whined and nosed him.

The Fae king had loved his mother. Loved her beyond reason.

The Fae king was his *father*.

But how could he ever love Finn? Finn had killed Maeve Ashton. Finn had killed his own mother. She had been the love of Thalanil's life.

Finally, Thalanil looked at him again. Some color was back in his cheeks, but he still looked as if he were staring at a ghost. These words had sounded wrenched out of him. They had splashed in phantom blood on the ground. His expression was unreadable now. Finn curled against Tyreon as if he could disappear into his fur. His father would kill him just as he had killed his mother, and would that not be fitting?

But Thalanil made no move to reach into the magic that suffused him. He just asked, "What--what is your name? What name did she give you?"

"F-Finn. It is short for--"

"*Finrael*," Thalanil whispered and shut his eyes tightly. Two tears ran down his cheeks. He opened them again but made no move to wipe them away. "It is the male version of my mother's name, Finraelin."

"Oh…"

"She was honoring my mother and trying to tell me something. She was telling me that she knew and accepted what was to come," he said softly. "Oh, Maeve!"

"What--"

"She knew what would happen if she gave birth to you and let you live," Thalanil said, more to himself than to Finn.

But his words are electrifying. “She knew I would *kill* her? And she--”

“She wanted you to live. She *chose* to sacrifice herself. That’s why she did not tell me about you because I swore after what happened with Marikoth that I would end the life of any child of mine who was a Death Mage,” Thalanil explained.

Finn curled forward again. Fresh tears fell. “You should have! She would still be alive and--”

“She did not want that.” Thalanil’s right hand was suddenly on Finn’s left shoulder. It was a brief touch, but warmth bloomed there like a benediction. “She wanted you to *live,* and I… I must honor that.”

“You shouldn’t.” Finn balled his hands into fists. “I’ve met Marikoth. He came to me in a dream. He was the one I took life from. But it was to get back to Rohan--”

“*Rohan*?” Thalanil sounded amazed at this.

“Yes. He’s a Rirean lord, but he means you no harm. He got stuck here when he accidentally shot me with a bolt, and Tyreon dragged me behind the Wall. We’ve been trying to get back home ever since,” Finn told him.

Thalanil’s gaze grew distant. He suddenly straightened and looked in the direction that Finn had come from. “We have visitors.”

In that moment, Finn felt Rohan’s life signature coming up the steps. His head turned. Rohan was standing there, Lightbringer unsheathed, magical tattoos glowing brilliantly. His hood was flung back, and his blue eyes were filled with determination. Serxio and Leonid flanked him with their swords drawn, too. They had found him. Finn had no idea how until there was a *caw!* And his raven came to settle on the fire pit where it proceeded to clean its feathers with its beak.

“Get away from him, Thalanil,” Rohan’s voice sounded different as if there were harmonics underneath it. “He’s innocent. Any complaint you have, you have it with *me*.”

Thalanil’s expression grew hard and cold again. “Oh, yes, *King* Rohan, I do indeed think I have a complaint.”

REVELATIONS

It was likely always going to end this way, Rohan thought as he faced off against King Thalanil Ravenspar. Almost all his life he had imagined what it would be like to confront the man who had killed his parents. He'd pictured them meeting on the battlefield or maybe on Twilgate Cliffs where his parents had fallen. He'd imagined being filled with a righteous anger and a burning hatred. He would slay the Fae who had taken his parents' lives. He would gain justice for them. He would destroy the duplicitous Fae king who had tricked his parents into death.

That was how it was supposed to be.

But it was nothing like that.

Rohan wasn't even sure any longer that Thalanil *had* killed his parents. His righteous anger flailed, and his burning hatred sputtered. In this moment, revenge was the last thing on his mind. Protecting Finn was all he wanted to do, even if he left the Fae king standing, completely unscathed. The living outweighed the dead. His heart would become a smoking crater without Finn who was crying and down on his knees before Thalanil. What had the Fae king said? What had he done to Finn?

"Wait!" Finn cried, and he reached for Thalanil's right arm. He stopped short though when the Fae king's head jerked towards him. "Wait! Rohan isn't king. He's a noble of Rirea, yes, but not-- what? Why are you laughing?"

"I am not laughing at you, Finrael," Thalanil said as the chilly laughter continued for a moment. "I am laughing at *him*." He stabbed a finger towards Rohan. "His little lies are collapsing around him."

"Whose Finrael?" Serxio asked.

"Finn, you idiot! Quiet!" Leonid hissed.

"What are you talking about, King Thalanil?" Finn swiped at his tears and struggled to his feet.

"Look at his face, dear one!" Thalanil gestured towards Rohan.

Finn blinked at the endearment, but Rohan realized why Thalanil had said it. Finn was Thalanil's son. Seeing them side by side made the resemblance undeniable. They had the same chin and nose. The same lips. The same way of narrowing their eyes when angry or confused.

"Are you a simple Rirean lord, King Rohan, like my Finrael thinks or no?" Thalanil mocked.

Finn's eyes met Rohan's. Rohan hesitated then shook his head. His cheeks suffused with an ashamed blush. His "simple" lie had turned into a potential war-creating disaster. He should have told Finn from the beginning. He should never have lied. Yes, he'd had "good" reasons, but they had also been selfish ones. He'd meant no harm, but that didn't matter as he may have caused it. There had been

many times he'd almost confessed it to Finn but feared being overheard. The irony was that he told Ryleth who he was. He should have told Finn immediately.

"I wished to tell you, Finn. That was what I was going to tell you when we got home," Rohan said with a grimace. "I know you must be angry with me. But I just wanted you to see me as a *man* and not… not as a *king*. But I should not have lied. I'm so sorry."

Finn stared at him without any expression on his face, and Rohan felt like his heart might fall through his feet. Then there was a small smile, Finn murmured, "Rohan. You *did* tell me who you were. If I had asked, you would have confirmed you were king. I was so stupid not to see it before. The way you spoke of Rirea as if you controlled it--"

"No, no, not stupid! Never stupid! You are brilliant and kind and trusting. I am the only one at fault," Rohan assured him.

"I suppose I could never imagine a--a king wanting to be with me," Finn said, and flushed in embarrassment and confusion.

Fire filled the Fae king's eyes as he glared at Rohan. "You had the *temerity* to touch my son?"

Thalanil's voice was silky and deadly. Finn's head jerked up, and his mouth opened in shock at Thalanil's tone. Whatever Rohan, Serxio and Leonid had interrupted between them must have been very complicated because, on the one hand, it was clear that Thalanil was being very protective of Finn, but on the other, Finn seemed utterly shocked by it.

Serxio whispered, "This is not good. Trust me when I tell you that I have dealt with enough angry parents to know this."

"Every single woman in the castle has parents angry with you," Leonid growled.

"Exactly. And Thalanil looks angrier than any of them," Serxio pointed out.

"I--I wanted him, King Thalanil. I wanted Rohan. He didn't take advantage of me. I chose him," Finn got out, cheeks flaming.

"He did not even tell you who he really was, Finrael. You had no idea who you were even wanting," Thalanil growled.

Magic filled the air. The smell of ozone snapped at Rohan's senses. His hair stood on end. Lightning crackled between Thalanil's hands. The cloudless sky suddenly grew dark as thunder clouds rolled across the sun until all sunlight was blotted out. Serxio and Leonid gasped and stared up at the sky. Rohan was suddenly incredibly grateful he had insisted that Ryleth stay with the horses. At least he had not led her to her death. His friends on the other hand… what had he done?

"By the gods," Serxio whispered.

"Can you… can you stop him, Rohan?" Leonid asked.

Rohan did not think so. Compared to the Mages and magic they had seen so far, they'd experienced nothing like this. Rohan couldn't have even comprehended anything like this.

"For your crimes of invading my lands, violating my son and brandishing a weapon at me, your punishment is *death*," Thalanil intoned, and he lifted his hands to reign holy hell down upon them.

Then, just like with Tyreon before, Finn jumped between them.

"No, Father!" Finn screamed.

"Finn, get back!" Rohan yelled at the same time.

But Thalanil, unlike Rohan and his crossbow, stopped and looked stricken at the use of the term "father". Uncertainty clouded his handsome features. Thunder and

lightning still rolled across the black skies, but it did not lash out at them. Not yet. Finn, though, did not back down despite the rageful storm that mirrored King Thalanil's mood. Finn seemed unafraid. Instead, he spread his arms wide to block Thalanil's view of Rohan.

"Please," Finn begged. "They just came here to help me. That's all. All of this is my fault. Not theirs. If you care for me at all, I plead with you to not hurt them. Please, Father. Please."

The lightning around Thalanil's hands died. But the sky was still black as pitch. Only the silver mushrooms illuminated the space. He reached a hand out to Finn.

"Come to me, Finrael," Thalanil ordered.

"Only if you promise to not hurt them and let them go," Finn said, staying as he was. "Send them home. Back to Rirea."

"No, Finn! Don't do this!" Rohan cried, even as he wondered at himself. This was Finn's father. The Empire was where Finn belonged. But his heart screamed out: NO! If Finn stayed here and he was sent away, they might never see one another again.

A huge bolt of lightning streaked across the sky, splitting it open, and then a *BOOM* of thunder shook the ground and almost had Rohan, Serxio and Leonid on their asses. But they just barely managed to keep their feet.

"By the gods! Rohan, look!" Leonid cried and tugged on his arm.

Behind them was a portal and through the portal, Rohan could see the twisted Lupine Woods. Home, after so much danger. Home was right there. They were all so close. And yet, Rohan had never felt farther from Finn.

"Go!" Thalanil ordered. "Leave this place! Take your pitiful lives from my sight!"

Rohan turned back. "Not without Finn."

Thalanil laughed almost shrilly. "Finrael stays *here*. With me. In his home."

Rohan opened his mouth, but Finn had spun around towards him. Their eyes locked and Finn shook his head.

"It's all right, Rohan. I want you to go," Finn told him. There was such a sad look on his face, but he urged, "Rirea needs you."

"And I need *you*," Rohan choked out.

Finn closed his eyelids as if relishing those words, memorizing them, holding them to him. Finally, Finn opened them and in his gaze was *love*. He murmured, "And I you. We'll be together again. Believe me."

Thalanil extended his right hand. Serxio and Leonid were tossed through the portal. His companions let out shocked cries as they landed in undignified heaps on the forest floor. Rohan resisted the blast of power. His feet sank into the earth. He pointed Lightbringer directly ahead of him as if to pierce the magical blast. Thalanil's lips writhed back from his teeth, and a new, more powerful blast upended Rohan and sent him spinning through the portal too.

He smashed into the ground. All the breath was knocked from his body, and he already felt bruises blooming all over his right hip. Even as he could not quite catch his breath, he scrambled upwards, staggering to his feet. He weaved drunkenly side to side as his body shook at the power of the blow he'd taken.

"Rohan!" Finn cried.

Those green eyes were terrified for him. Thalanil put a hand on Finn's shoulder, keeping him where he was.

"F-Finn! I will get you back," Rohan gasped out. "I will--"

"On the contrary, King Rohan, if you ever come into my lands again," Thalanil stated, "I will destroy you."

The portal closed, and the sight of Finn was lost to him. The magic winked out of existence as if it had never been. Just the Lupine Woods and the Wall remained before them.

"Rohan, what are we going to do?" Serxio asked as he sat up slowly and grimaced at the mud and twigs covering his clothes.

"How are we going to get to Finn?" Leonid asked, spitting out leaves. "Thalanil might be Finn's dad, but the man is not stable! He has no right to separate you!"

Rohan looked down at Lightbringer, and he thought of his uncle's theory about a tree with leaves of glass. "Do not worry. We will see Finn again. I will make it so."

The Story Continues in Cinders & Ashes Book 3!

T you so much for reading Cinders & Ashes 2. I sincerely hope you enjoyed it!

If you'd like to know more about my serial site, who not check out the first 10 chapters of another high fantasy story, The Elven King's Blade, for FREE?

Just go HERE and read to your heart's content. If you'd like to sign up, there are instructions! I'd love to see you on the site.

If you have any other questions, please feel free to reach out to me on Facebook or through email raythereign@gmail.com

Thank you again for your support!

X. Aratare/Raythe